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Parasocial and School Relationships of Pre-school Children

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ABSTRACT

Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships that consumers have with media characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This dissertation answers recent calls for more research into the role these relationships play in children's lives. More specifically, this research explores the impact parasocial relationships have on preschool students' interpersonal relationships – to see if these unique media bonds change whom children choose to have relationships with in school. Because of their tendency to overwhelmingly choose same sex children as friends, preschool age children were the participants. Results of this study found that girls are more likely than boys to select opposite-sex media characters as their favorite and that this selection impacts their friend choices in school. Specifically, girls with male parasocial partners are more likely to play with boys and have male best friends in school. Previously, Maccoby (1998) argued that the same-sex relationships one has in preschool create disparate cultures between the sexes and that this divide continues to influence adult life. Combining the present results with those of Maccoby, it is now clear that the media's increasing importance in the lives of toddlers and young children can have long lasting repercussions on future relationships, in particular, future opposite-sex interactions.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter One:

Introduction

In his February 2013 State of the Union address, President Obama called for universal preschool in America because he believes that it is the first step toward a well-educated populace. Not only is preschool the first stage of formal education for children, it is also a time that represents major change across many aspects of their lives. For the first time, between the ages of three and five, children are choosing who their friends will be based purely on shared interests. This simple fact contributes to huge strides in their gender development (Maccoby, 1998). Existing research demonstrates that when offered the choice, girls largely choose female friends and boys choose male friends (Fabes, Martin & Hanish, 2004). This sex-segregated selection is important because the games children play and the way they interact with one another creates a shared meaning and culture, which stays with them through all of their interpersonal relationships (Maccoby, 1998). Arguably, it is not simply that 'men are from Mars' and 'women are from Venus,' it is that boys played superheroes together on the playground while girls played house.

Given the growing national appreciation of the importance of the academic aspects of preschool, it is important to also understand the importance of these social aspects of preschool. Knowing that relational patterns formed at this age can be influential throughout the life course, we must understand how preschool children form friendships. From research on media effects, we now know the media plays a major role in this process (see: Hust & Brown, 2008). For example, parents have reported that children as young as two years old are watching television and have favorite shows and characters (Wilson & Drogos, 2007).

Media's role in the lives of children is heavily researched. Specifically, researchers have investigated the role of television in gender role attitudes and socialization (Hust & Brown, 2008; Ex, Janssens, & Korzilius, 2002), make-believe play, imagination, and creativity (Singer & Singer, 2008), academic performance (Anderson & Hanson, 2009), repetition and comprehension (Crawley et al, 1999), and favorite characters and parasocial interactions (Hoffner, 2006; Wilson & Drogos, 2007) – just to name a few topics. Further, gender schema theory explains that children develop and begin to understand their own gender by watching models in the media (Bem, 1983). Similarly, the study of parasocial relationships suggests that when consumers identify with media characters and form bonds to them it forms a relationship similar to an interpersonal relationship (Giles, 2002). Finally, because the media landscape is forever changing the role that it plays in children's lives is also changing.

Extant research has shown that children bond with media characters well before they start preschool and have already formed emotional and parasocial relationships with them (Hoffner, 2006). These parasocial relationships imply children possess a level of identification with the character as a person, that they have internalized norms of behavior, and that they also express a desire to have the character as a friend in real life (Giles, 2002; Hoffner, 2006; Wilson & Drogos, 2007).

In addition, limited female characters for children to relate to and bond with characterize the present media landscape. The most notable example of female protagonists is Dora the Explorer. Conversely, the media is currently replete with male characters (ex. Spongebob, Mickey Mouse, and Blue from Blue's Clues). Children are most likely to select same-sex friends and as a result of the current media landscape, girls are left to either choose a male favorite character, or choose from a limited selection of

female characters. Research bears this out; girls are much more likely to select favorite male characters than boys are to select female characters (Hoffner, 2006). Who children choose to be friends with contributes to their understanding of social rules, language, and social culture (Maccoby, 1998). Knowing this, children's media relationships may also impact them socially in terms of their willingness to play with opposite sex friends. However, it is as still unknown what role this plays in the classroom when children are placed in social situations. Specifically, while existing research noted that boys and girls engage in gendered types of play in preschool (Maccoby, 1998), we do not know if this is still the case when children have relationships with opposite-sex media characters that predate their interpersonal relationships. It is also unknown how other children view the students who engage in opposite-sex play.

Understanding the relationship between a child's choice of favorite media character and best friend could begin to answer some of these questions. Indeed, this interaction may have ramifications for how preschoolers form interpersonal relationships and engage with the opposite sex throughout their lives. Maccoby (1998) claimed that the relationships people have in preschool affect their relationships in the future based on the shared language, rules, and norms of behavior established in those very early years. Therefore, if the media influences whom children choose as their friends in preschool, then the media will also impact this generation's opposite-sex relationships going forward.

In order to better understand this relationship between media friend and school friend, various levels of this relationship must be explored. First, the role of the media in children's lives is examined. This assessment includes an account of Piaget's theory of cognitive development in order to illustrate that children are cognitively different from

their adult counterparts and that they receive and interpret messages differently depending on their development. Next we must track gender development, looking at past research that explores the role of media in children's understanding of male and female roles. Following this, gender development and media use is explicated. Boys and girls use media, and are attracted to media characters, differently thus building a case for how the media affects the sexes in diverse ways. Finally, the topic of friendship development and media use introduces parasocial relationships as a key component to this research. This research is informed by information processing theory and gender schema theory, which offer insight into both how consumers learn from the media and how children form their gender identity as keys to investigating the research questions and hypotheses posed in the present study. It is here that the broad strokes research question of this dissertation is raised – how do media relationships affect the interpersonal relationships of preschool children?

Chapter Two:

Literature Review, Research Questions, and Hypotheses

Starting at a very young age, children explore cues about gender – what they should play, whom they should play with, and how they should act while they play – from the people closest to them, for example, through interpersonal channels (see: Guerrero, Jones, & Boburka, 2006; Lytton & Romney, 1991; Maccoby, 1998; Martin & Ruble, 2004; Zosuls et al, 2009). From this immense assortment of gendered cues in their social world, children quickly learn how to behave (Martin & Ruble, 2004). At first, research into the socialization of children focused solely on interpersonal communication channels. In this framework, roles and norms for behavior are first learned through the observation of a child's own family and then later by observing his or her peers and through lived experiences. This view of development has more recently been expanded to also include the effects of media (e.g., Hoffner, 2008; Hust & Brown, 2008; Meyer, Murphy, Cascardi & Birns, 1991).

Hust and Brown (2008) explain that the media presents children with a window into the larger world as soon as they are old enough to sit in front of a television screen. Moreover, Hoffner (2008) argues that the media is not only another influence, but a critical one to a child's development of certain characteristics. The author explains that although children form their first and most important relationships with their parents, at increasingly young ages, children often spend a great deal of time with various media outlets.

Adding additional weight to the claim that children spend an exorbitent amount of time with the media, extensive research by the Kaiser Family Foundation explored electronic media in the lives of children and reported that, in a typical day, 83 percent of

American children ages six months to six years use some form of screen media (Rideout & Hamel, 2006). For a typical child this equates to nearly two hours of screen time every day (Rideout & Hamel, 2006). Many researchers argue that this time is spent learning from television charcters, forming potential relationships with these characters, and being influenced by the images that they see (e.g. Giles, 2002; Hoffner, 2006; Wilson & Drogos, 2007).

Information Processing Theory

The mass media's most notable effect on gender identity is that it provides norms for behavior and models to imitate. Information processing theory (IPT) has long been utilized to explore how the mass media affects consumer behavior and modeling. At its core, IPT explains how individuals manage incoming information by developing skills in the areas of acquisition, encoding, organization, and retrieval of information (John, 1999). Since its introduction, there have been many proposed models of information processing. The most fundamental, developed by Hovland, Janis, and Kelly (1953), put forward the idea that the final decision to change one's way of thinking follows a specific progression of events. The authors explain that once an individual has been exposed to a message, s/he must focus on it, understand its content, and finally appraise that content. Ultimately, based on this appraisal, the authors explain that individuals are able to form new beliefs and attitudes about the message (Hovland, et al, 1953). For young children, this process is much simpler. Given young children's over reliance on symbols and perceptual boundedness – or a dependence on perceptual information while often being unaware of unobservable or non-obvious information that may be relevant – opinions and attitudes are formed quickly (Strasburger, 2009). Looking specifically at gender roles and norms, both children and adults adopt gender-stereotypes schemas from the media

(Bem, 1983). That being said, because gender development occurs primarily in childhood, it is necessary to note that due to their limited lived experiences and limited exposure to information about gendered behavior, children lack contrasting information to messages presented by mass media (Chernin, 2008). Thus, using this theory in relation to gender development, children are more likely to change their attitude and adopt witnessed behavior than more experienced adults (Chernin, 2008).

When researching children, the different process models of IPT are increasingly important as many describe and evaluate the process by which children of all ages understand the media. As a result, media researchers have been interested in the effects that this level of exposure has on child development at different ages and stages of maturity. In particular, it has been established that children's comprehension of television and television characters develops along a path comparable to Piaget's (1952) stages of cognitive development (Reeves, 1979).

Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development

Piaget's theory of cognitive development explains age differences in terms of stages and is well documented as one of the leading explanations for age differences in children's responses to advertising (Palmer & MacNeil, 1991; Roedder, 1981). By using these stages, Piaget illustrated that as a child moves through development, each phase operates with limitations on the ability of the child to internally understand and perceive information from the environment (Roedder, 1981; Soldow, 1983). Therefore, children comprehend the same stimuli differently depending on their age (Palmer & MacNeil, 1991).

Looking specifically at the stages, Piaget outlines four distinct phases of development from birth through age 15, when a child is said to develop adult information

processing ability. The initial stage begins in the sensorimotor period (birth – 24 months). During this time the child begins with only innate, reflexive capabilities, but eventually develops the ability to form primitive symbolic representations of behavior (Palmer & MacNeil, 1991). At the end of this stage, the child has a clear understanding of when the television is on and off, and if that means they can watch their favorite shows. This is the beginning of establishing a routine of television watching and becoming attracted to certain characters and programming. A child in the sensorimotor period can recognize logos and symbols well enough to understand if they are on the correct channel and can make basic inferences as to if their show is currently on or not (Palmer & MacNeil, 1991). This baseline understanding of television and viewing habits is necessary before a child can progress to the preoperational phase, which is the subject of this research. Limitations of the sensorimotor phase are huge and include lack of language development and an undeveloped ability to relate and engage with others – at this stage children are witnessed in parallel play, as opposed to engaging with one another.

With the commencement of symbolic representation capability, the child moves to the preoperational period (two – 7 years). In this stage, symbolic performance begins with object stability and continues with impersonation, symbolic play, and language (Palmer & MacNeil, 1991). The ability to speak and express oneself also brings an ability to control behavior and classify objects. It is at this stage where relationships with media characters are transformed in the child's mind. Specifically, this means that during the preoperational period the child forms attachments to favorite characters, pretends to be like their favorite characters, dresses up, and engages in imaginary play with his/her favorite character (Hoffner, 2008; Wilson & Drogos, 2007). This symbolic performance

will be vital to school relationships and play as it is potentially the link between the children – if they both engage in imaginary play with the same characters, then perhaps the lines of sex-segregated play are crossed. Limitations at this stage include perceptual boundedness and difficulty understanding the difference between fantasy and reality. Preschool students are perceptually bound, meaning that they pay extra attention to how stimuli look and sound often to the exclusion of other more relevant plot information (Wilson, 2008). For example, children below the age of six or seven will group objects together based on shared perceptual features, like color, shape, or type, whereas older children will look more to conceptual properties or functions (Strasburger, 2009; Wilson, 2008). This shows that their path to decision making and connecting objects, groups, and people is much simpler in this stage and this may influence their choices, likes, and dislikes. Applying this to television and character attraction, preoperational children are more likely to attend to a character's physical appearance and actions and learn from those instead of the larger plot line or motivations of the character (Wilson, 2008). Supporting this idea, it has been documented that preoperational children are more likely to admire an attractive character even if they are the villain whereas older children will question the motives of the character in addition to their physical attractiveness (Wilson, 2008). Another preoperational limitation includes fantasy-reality disconnections where the children loose sight of the fact that the characters are on the screen and not in real life (Richert & Smith, 2011). This is unique to children as when adults watch television they are keenly aware that the characters on the screen are not real. With children, this line is blurred. Wilson (2008) explains that children aged two-three will often ascribe life to even inanimate objects, have imaginary friends, and talk to the television screen. By age four or five Wilson explains that children first start to question the reality of television

programming and can understand that it is just a representation, however, they rely on prominent physical reality infringements to make final judgments on content. For example, cartoons are often described as fantasy strictly because the characters are animated (Wilson, 2008). In other words, pre-operational children may perceive something to be realistic simply because it looks visually real.

When it comes to the media, understanding what is real and not real is paramount. If children are unclear as to whether the characters on the screen are fictional or their actual friends, research shows that they can be more easily persuaded by the messages (Chernin, 2008). From here, the children are more likely to learn from the television characters, internalize the messages, and finally identify with the character and relate to them. These are the first steps in forming a relationship with that character.

As the child ages out of the preoperational phase they enter the concrete operational period (seven – 11 years). Here the child overcomes the limitations of the preoperational period and acquires new abilities (Palmer & MacNeil, 1991). These new abilities include being able to see a situation or event from another person's perspective, allowing for additional identification and empathy for media characters (Palmer & MacNeil, 1991).

Finally, the child moves from the concrete operational period to the final formal operational period (11-15 years), he or she is able to think about abstract concepts, like logic, deductive reasoning, and systematic planning. At this stage, the child is no longer seen as a "mental child" (Palmer & MacNeil, p. 31). In Piagetian terms, when a child reaches this stage, their cognitive abilities have reached maturity.

Understanding the stages of cognitive development is paramount to comprehending how the media affects children differently at all ages in conjunction with

the cognitive limitations present at each stage. Indeed, at the same time, these stages occur alongside children's gender development and understanding of themselves as male or female.

Gender Schema Theory

Organized like traditional schema theory (Bartlett, 1932), and with roots in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2009), gender schema theory outlines the cognitive and social process a child goes through when encoding and organizing information regarding him- or herself, in tandem with cultural definitions of male and female (Bem, 1983). Like cognitive-development theories, Bem's gender schema theory (1983) explains that a child's cognitive processes, including developmental limitations, mediate the formation of gender schemas – or conceptual frameworks of gender. This cognitive development process involves a need for cognitive consistency explaining that children are motivated toward self-categorization (Bem, 1983). Piaget's theory explains that young children are limited in their cognitive thinking and therefore exhibit a natural inclination to group similar objects and traits together or be easily persuaded by media portrayals of gender stereotypes. Gender schema theory explains that these cognitive limitations are what arbitrates the development of their gender schemas and forms a child's gendered behavior.

While gender schema theory proposes that sex typing is mediated by a child's cognitive and developmental limitations, it also clearly takes from social learning theory (Bandura, 2009). The theory assumes that sex typing and stereotyping are social phenomena, and part of a process of a greater social community, as in social cognitive theory (Bem, 1983). Thus, in the same way that Bandura (2009) was able to illustrate the fact that consumers learn by watching television, gender schema theory shows how a

constant depiction of housewives and male breadwinners can influence a viewer's opinion of gender roles in our society. This is an important element to the theory as it implies that, as a learned phenomenon, sex typing is neither inevitable, nor unchangeable (Bem, 1983). However, it may be the case that, due to their cognitive limitations, preoperational children may be more prone to accepting the stereotyped portrayals of gender seen in the media.

Gender Development

Gender development is an ongoing process; Maccoby (1998) estimates that children make the largest advancements while in the preoperational stage. This stage, as mentioned, corresponds with the preschool and early elementary school years. At this age, children's understanding of male and female gender roles is still in a more fluid state and yet it impacts whom the child chooses as a friend and what roles they each play in the relationship (Maccoby, 1998). Meyer, Murphy, Cascardi and Birns (1991) expand on Maccoby's narrower view of social interaction as the primary contributor to gender identity and offer the insight that children spend more time watching television than all other activities besides sleep. In explaining the many influences on gender-identity, the authors' state, "even if the family didn't influence the development of gender-differentiated behavior in children, the media would suffice" (p. 537).

Also looking at media exposure and development, Huntemann and Morgan (2000) explain, "children will replicate the role expectations seen in the media when asked about appropriate chores for boys and girls" (p. 315). The authors continue on to make the distinction that young children are not simply blindly imitating, but rather these messages strengthen gender-based attitudes about behavior (Huntemann & Morgan, 2000). This explains that as children are watching and replicating gender roles from the

media, they are developing and solidifying their own gender expectations, as explained through gender schema theory. It is for this reason that who the children choose as their favorite character plays a role in their gender development because children in the preoperational stage are actively imitating the behavior they witness.

Combining all of the above, these facts point to the necessity of researching the media's role in gender development at the age when children first enter school.

Gender Development and Media Use

While prior research established that interpersonal relationships play a large role in children's gender development, more research needs to be done to better understand specific facets of gender development, including the effect of media on children's daily life at school and gendered play. Indeed, as Klerfelt (2004) notes, "[c]hildren today live in different cultural settings. The preschool culture is one of them and the media culture outside the pre-school another" (p. 73). While the dearth of research in this specific vein is notable, there is, however, a plethora of research detailing the media's role in gender development more generally (see: Cordua, McGraw, & Drabman, 1979; Ex, Janssens, & Korzilius, 2002; Hoffner, 2006; Hoffner, 2008; Hust & Brown, 2008; Luecke-Aleka, Anderson, Collins, & Schmitt, 1995).

Following gender schema theory, Hust and Brown (2008) explain that individuals learn about gender in three stages, with the media playing an important role in each stage. In the first stage the individual observes the cultural expectations conveyed through various gendered institutions, including family, school, work, and media. Second, these observations are assimilated into an understanding of how to appropriately 'do gender.' Finally, individuals form gendered schemas which inform their own gendered identities (Hust & Brown, 2008). While the authors did not explicitly connect their stages to

Piaget, it can be deduced that they follow the same tragectory. First, children in both the sensorimotor and preoperational phase of development are observing the appropriate behavior of their gender by watching and imitating models from their family, school, and the media. Given their developmental limitations, children in these stages are less able to discern from the differences between actual reality and mediated portrayals and are therefore more influenced by what they see (Chernin, 2008; Wilson, 2008). Children in these age groups are still focusing on salient features of the media and gender portrayals and are more likely to take them at face value especially without a more sophisticated understanding of character motives or complicated plotlines. For example, a mother cooking dinner for her family on television becomes a role that females fulfill instead of something that a woman enjoys doing for the people she loves.

Following this, children in the concrete operational are able to understand situations and how they should act in their gendered role, this allows them the knowledge to 'do' their own gender. Here they have taken the guidelines from actors and have internalized them as acceptable for their gender. Internalization is a process by which an individual accepts the presentation of the media ideal as the norm (Cohen, 2001). Levine and Harrison (2009) note that this process occurs when individuals "extend normative beliefs about the *world* as presented in the mass media, to beliefs about attitudes and behaviors about the *self*" (p. 530). Finally, children in the concrete operational period are able to take from these internalized messages of gender and form their own gender identities.

Adding to this baseline understanding of gender development, according to Wilson and Drogos (2007), children are able to recognize their own gender by the age of two. Based on this association, they then make media character preferences. This is in

line with adult research on favorite character selection which explains that both men and women most frequently select same-sex characters as their favorite (Wilson & Drogos, 2007). Turning to the character preference of children specifically, the authors wrote that in 2007, the top two most popular television shows for this age group were SpongeBob SquarePants and Dora the Explorer, with an average of one million and 900,000 preschool viewers per week, respectively. Relying on social learning theory and gender schema theory, Wilson and Drogos (2007) evaluated the incidence and importance of children imitating the behavior on TV. They reported that 97 percent of parents testified to their children having a favorite character as well as owning consumer goods associated with that character, and 68 percent of parents said that they have witnessed their child imitating behaviors observed on television. The question remains, what characters do children select as their favorites – which are their targets for imitation and relationships?

To answer this question, one must begin with an understanding of the range of options available to children. While Dora the Explorer was the second most popular show geared towards children in this age group, it is also one of the few popular shows with a female protagonist. In fact, Wilson and Drogos (2007) explain that male characters outnumber female characters in children's programming. As a result of this gender imbalance, girls have to be more flexible with their choice of favorite character than boys.

Of course, other factors might lead girls to select boy characters. For example, in our patriarchical society, male characters typically have more power, and are generally greatly favored, making them even more appealing to all viewers (Wilson & Drogos, 2007). This unequal representation of male and female characters can be seen in myriad ways, for example, male superheroes saving the damsel in distress; Simba, the Lion King,

growing up to be big and strong, ruling his pride of lions; women, as mothers, typically staying home and solving domestic problems; or Cinderella as a house slave to her evil stepmother and stepsisters. This gendered pattern of portrayals could have a meaningful influence on whom young girls choose as their favorite media characters, leading them to prefer the more powerful or interesting male characters. Meanwhile, boys are not left with the decision to abandon their same-sex preferences because there are many attractive male characters.

H1: Preschool boys will select same-sex characters as their favorite more often than preschool girls.

Gender Development and Preschool

As the first occasion for most children to interact solely with their peers without their parents' guidance and direction, preschool is an opportunity for many children to make their first choices about whom they choose as friends. In their research looking at gender as a context for understanding children's relationships, Fabes, Martin and Hanish (2004) observed peer relationships in preschool and concluded that, universally, boys and girls exclusively play with same-sex partners. Interestingly, the tendency for same-sex play is driven by children themselves, and not due to pressure or guidance from adults (Fabes, Martin & Hanish, 2004). Due to this differentiation of play, Maccoby (1998) explains that gender-segregated playgroups represent influential socialization environments where children acquire distinct interaction skills that are adapted to suit their same-sex partners. She goes on to argue that these sex-typed interactions have serious implications for the subsequent same-sex and opposite-sex relationships that individuals form as they mature (Maccoby, 1998). Specifically, Maccoby (1998) argues

that in separating boys and girls, each group forms their own language, social rules, and understanding of how one should behave and interact.

While this segregation starts in preschool, it intensifies as children reach kindergarten age. Fabes, Martin & Hanish (2004) report that preschoolers are three times more likely to interact with same-sex peers than opposite-sex peers, while children around age six were 11 times more likely. The prevalence of exclusive same-sex peer relationship interactions at such young ages points to larger questions surrounding the consequences of sex segregation.

Looking additionally at how children play with one another, Maccoby (1998) explains that their shared creation of rules and norms is one factor that separates children from adults. By the age of four or five, children have been observed taking on complicated reciprocal play where rules are mutually understood by all participants and are often created as the play progresses. These games and rules help to create shared meaning among participants and a distinct culture develops for each group of playmates. Further influencing this potential differentiation is the fact that, while both boys and girls engage in play, the games they play begin to become distinct around preschool age (e.g., boys play make-believe superheroes and girls play make-believe house), thus differently influencing the children's norms for behavior and communication (Fabes, Martin & Hanish, 200; Zosuls, et al., 2009; Maccoby, 1998).

Friendship Development and Media Use

Therefore, children's choice of a favorite character, and imitation of his or her behavior, is an important area to study for a number of reasons. First, there is a potential for children to feel an emotional connection to the character that exists beyond the mediated encounter (Wilson & Drogos, 2007). Second, these encounters draw the viewer

into “social worlds” (Hoffner, p. 309). In these ways, the relationships formed as a result of children’s connection to a media character creates powerful and important influences on their behavior and development beyond the time spent actually viewing the media portrayal. As mentioned, one of the primary purposes of this research is to examine whether the relationships children form with mediated characters can influence their interactions with their preschool peers.

However, there is considerable debate amongst media scholars about whether these social attachments to media characters are as meaningful as face-to-face relationships (Giles, 2002). Regardless of the outcome of this debate, it is undeniable that individuals, particularly children, do form impressions and develop bonds to individuals known to them only through symbolic media interfaces (Hoffner, 2008). In children, these bonds manifest themselves in a number of important ways, for example, a child may emulate the behavior they have witnessed or engage in make-believe play with the character – pretending that he or she is a personal friend. Such behaviors are well documented in the literature on parasocial relationships (Wilson & Drogos, 2007; Hoffner, 2006).

Parasocial Relationships

Researchers first began to take notice of a peculiar relationship they saw developing between consumers and media characters as early as the 1950s. In their seminal article on the subject, Horton and Wohl (1956) described this “striking characteristic of the new mass media” (p. 215). Despite the unique nature of these new relationships, since that time researchers have been successful in defining “parasocial relationship” in terms of usual social activities and social relationships (Cohen, 1997;

Cohen 2003; Derrick, Gabriel & Tippin, 2008; Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008).

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are one-sided relationships that consumers create with media characters, including radio hosts, newscasters, and television characters (Derrick, Gabriel & Tippin, 2008; Horton & Wohl, 1956). These relationships form as parasocial interactions (PSI) become more frequent and viewers spend more time with media characters. During this time, a sense of intimacy develops out of the collective encounters between the viewer and the character (Derrick, Gabriel & Tippin, 2008). Over time, the media character becomes predictable – the viewer is able to "know," "understand," and foresee the media character's next moves (Derrick, Gabriel & Tippin, p. 261). In this light, the audience member's sense of intimacy, combined with a fully developed understanding of what kind of person the media character is, leads him or her to believe that these characters are included in the viewer's group of friends by extension (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In addition, all other characters in the program will eventually be brought into the mix, suggesting that they are also a part of the intimacy created by the shared experience (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Finally, with social attraction, similarity, identification, and repeated exposure to the character, the parasocial relationship gains in relational importance (Derrick, Gabriel & Tippin, 2008, Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Hoffner, 2006).

The study of children and parasocial relationships is gaining in popularity, partly as a result of the sheer amount of time children spend with media. The Kaiser Family Foundation published that children are spending an average of two hours a day with media (Rideout & Hamel, 2006). Meanwhile, Wilson and Drogos (2007) reported that children as young as two years old have favorite media characters. While this is known,

the sex and gender literature has yet to catch up and we are left wondering if both boys and girls engage in parasocial relationships?

RQ1: Will both preschool boys and preschool girls engage in a parasocial relationships with at least one favorite media character?

Development of Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships mimic the development of traditional interpersonal relationships in a number of important ways. First, viewers are most likely to begin a parasocial relationship with media characters if they are attracted to them (both socially and physically), if they share similar attributes, and if they can identify with certain character traits. Of course, people look for these very same factors in an interpersonal relationship (Cohen, 2003). Second, PSRs are used to fulfill a relationship need like companionship, self-identification, or the need for attachment (Derrick, Gabriel & Tippin, 2008; Giles, 2002; Wang, Fink & Cai, 2008). Finally, parasocial relationships and interpersonal relationships share many emotional aspects (Cohen, 2003). For example, in his research on PSR breakups, Cohen (2003) discovered the impact of PSR dissolution to be psychologically trying in many of the same ways as an interpersonal relationship breakup.

However, while they may share many similarities with interpersonal relationships, the research clearly shows that parasocial relationships are not, in fact, equivalent to them. Referring to a long-standing definition of relationships by Hinde (1979), "a relationship exists only when the probable course of future interactions between the participants differs from that between strangers" (p. 16). In a PSR, the viewer will always remain a stranger to the media persona throughout the relationship. On the other hand, children often blur this line in their minds. Adults are aware of the fact that they

will never get to meet the media character in real life, and also that the character on the screen is not the same as the person or actor in real life or in other fictional situations; due to fantasy-reality disconnect, which is a limitation of the preoperational stage, this distinction is often lost on very young children (Richert & Smith, 2011).

Thus, due to their cognitive limitations, children's relationships with a media character may potentially take on a much larger role than it would with an adult. They understand the character to be a friend with whom they go on adventures, who talks directly to them, and who likes the same things they like. Because of their reality-fantasy disconnect, the child feels like the character on the screen is his or her friend, just like any other child they befriend (Richert & Smith, 2011).

Research into the media lives of children have explicated that girls are more likely than boys to choose an opposite-sex favorite media character. Due to the lines of fantasy and reality being blurred and children feeling as though the media character is their friend in real life, there is a question of how an opposite-sex parasocial relationship will impact girls in preschool. It's possible that girls engaged in parasocial relationships may be more willing to seek out male friends in preschool. Therefore:

RQ2: Will preschool girls with male parasocial partners will be more willing to engage in play with boys as compared to preschool girls with same-sex parasocial relationships?

Wishful Identification

One concept strongly associated with research on children and parasocial relationships is wishful identification, or the longing to be like the character and imitate their behavior. Relating parasocial relationships and wishful identification is common practice, but also controversial. Giles (2002) points out that a successful typology of

viewer to media-character interaction must first begin with a clear distinction between parasocial relationships and identification. As the literature details, this causes additional classification issues (Giles, 2002; Hall, Wilson, Wiesner, & Cho, 2007). Feilitzen and Linne (1975) differentiated similarity identification, where a viewer identifies with a character based on a set of charactertics that they share, and wishful identification, where the viewer wants to imitate the character. Specifically with wishful identification, the viewer desires to be more like the character which whom they identify (Giles, 2002). This can be either in general (e.g., the media character is a role model), or specific (e.g., the media character models a particular behavior, like a way of dressing or a catch phrase.) It is important to differentiate this wishful identification from a parasocial relationship because parasocial relationship does not always imply a desire to emulate behavior or vice versa.

As a consequence of this conclusion, some researchers (e.g., Cohen, 2001; Hall, et al., 2007) make an explicit distinction between parasocial relationships and identification by dividing them into two separate, distinct phenomena. They argue that identification is a result of a psychological attachment to a character, in which the viewer envisions themself participating in the television show as the media character (Hall, et al., 2007). Therefore, "identification occurs as a result of an individual imagining him or herself as the character instead of actually interacting with the character while maintaining his or her identity" (Hall, et al., p. 10). On the contrary, parasocial relationships are that interaction between the consumer and the character. More specifically, after watching a television series for a period of time, viewers may come to feel that they know the characters as well as friends or neighbors, and thus form a similar relationship. Given these two disparate definitions, it may be assumed that when children desire to *be* the

character in wishful identification, they do not simply want to be *friends* with them and engage in a parasocial relationship.

H2: Children with higher wishful identification toward specific media characters will engage in fewer parasocial relationships with those characters.

Regardless of how one categorizes the interaction between wishful identification and parasocial relationships, a chief concern of research on wishful identification are the attributes that attract viewers to want to be like their favorite character. In the 1970s Reeves and his colleagues (Reeves & Greenberg, 1977; Reeves & Lometti, 1979; Reeves & Miller, 1978) observed which factors predict children's wishful identifcation with media characters. Early research in this area used multidimensional scaling and determined that, among children between the ages of seven and 12, physical strength and activity level were the most important determinants of identification for boys, and physical attractiveness was paramount for girls, but less so for boys (Hoffner, 2006).

These findings begin to point to a sex difference in both wishful identification and parasocial relationships. Research suggests that girls are more likely than boys to select an opposite-sex character as their favorite (Hoffner, 2006); still underdeveloped in the research is how this difference in attraction and wishful identification will impact the potential parasocial relationships of boys and girls. Still more intersting is how character selection contributes to children forming a psychological attactment to the character and desiring to be that character (wishful identification) or forming an emotional bond with the character and wanting a relationship (parasocial). Looking at character selection, it would be easier for males to desire to be the character because the majority of them are also male.

H3: The relationship between wishful identification and parasocial relationships will differ for boys and girls.

Continuing this research and looking to improve the understanding of the interaction between wishful identification and parasocial relationships, Hall, et al. (2007) conducted an almost identical study to Reeves, interviewing children between the ages of seven and 12 and questioning them on their favorite media character, wishful identification, parasocial interaction, and favorite character traits. The results from their research demonstrated that female children in their sample primarily looked at attractiveness of the character when engaging in PSR, while the male children used intelligence, attractiveness, and physical strength of their favorite character when forming parasocial relationships, thus confirming the seminal data (Hall, et al., 2007). This research is particularly significant in that it points to the larger issue that girls are receiving messages from television that, for people like them (female), physical appearance is their most significant trait.

RQ3: Which perceived character traits will predict parasocial interaction with male and female characters for preschool students?

This observation brings us back to the topic of children and gender development. It is now clear that both wishful identification and parasocial relationships are important, yet discrete concepts. Using cognitive-development theories as a base, and regardless of whether one focuses on identification or parasocial relationships, it is important to know which characters children identify with to see which behaviors and characteristics will most likely be imitated.

RQ4: Will preschool boy and girl's attraction to male and female characters' traits differ?

Additionally, understanding with whom the children form their first relationships is necessary in order to establish if they are involved in a parasocial relationship before entering school. This knowledge is critical because if a child is in an opposite-sex parasocial relationship before they start preschool, they already have important experience relating to the opposite sex.

RQ5: How do preschool children respond to their peers engaging in parasocial relationships with opposite-sex media characters?

RQ6: What are the effects of opposite-sex parasocial relationships and subsequent opposite-sex play on a child's gender identity?

On a different note, the variety, or lack thereof, of media characters available has ramifications for both wishful identification and parasocial relationships. As discussed, existing research confirms that there are fewer female protagonists than male ones. Further, research on wishful identification indicates that viewers identify more with characters of the same-sex (Hoffner, 2006; Reeves & Miller, 1978). As a result, boys have a wider variety and simply more character options to imitate and to choose as favorite characters than do girls. Consequently, girls often must merely hope to be friends with male characters, instead of to actually be them. The sex of the character therefore can have a much greater impact than that characteristic might otherwise warrant.

The Current Study

While much is known about PSRs in general, and in particular PSR development, several scholars in the field have made a call for more research concerning children's relationship with the media (Giles, 2002; Hoffner, 2008; Wilson & Drogos, 2007). While data exist to show that children possess imaginary friends (Gleason, 2002), engage in

fantasy play (Singer & Singer, 2008), talk with characters they are watching on TV (Anderson, et al., 2000), and learn about gender and their own gender-behavior from media character's behavior (Luecke-Aleka, et al., 1995), there has been no research to date that ties any of these actions with parasocial relationships. Specifically, Wilson and Drogos (2007) call parasocial relationships during childhood "a seriously overlooked topic" (p. 8).

Relevant findings which have begun to ameliorate this problem include: (1) often young children feel as though they know media characters on an intimate level (Hoffner, 2008; Anderson, et al., 2000); (2) the media can play an important role in the formation of the personal and social identity of young children, as well as their interactions and affective bonds, like those created with media characters which facilitate this process (Hoffner, 2008); (3) parasocial relationships can affect gender identity by impacting the concept of one's own gender, as well as the gender of others (Hoffner, 2008); and (4) children are often attracted to elements of their favorite characters which causes them to identify with the character and wish to be more like them, thus affecting future behavior (Hoffner, 2006).

Despite these efforts, a thorough review of parasocial literature still reveals large gaps in our understanding of the direct effect of a child's parasocial relationship on his or her gender development and peer relationships in preschool. This developmental stage is particularly important to understand because this is when these pivotal bonds and gendered culture begin to affect in-group relationships.

Chapter Three:

Methodology

Working with young children poses certain unique challenges such as literacy of the participant, comfort in new environments, reluctance to respond to questions, and limited attention span. Therefore, in order to reach our target sample size given the inherent challenges of working with children, we interviewed a small sample of children directly (phase 1) and then supplemented this data by asking a group of parents to act as interviewers for their own children (phase 2).

Phase One

In phase 1 a one-time, one-on-one interview, with 25 child participants was completed.

Qualitative research studies illustrate that children as young as four-years-old can provide insight into their lives and experiences, which is why interviewing child participants is common and the first phase of this research consisted of going directly to the children (Irwin & Johnson, 2005). In order to conduct the interviews, at least two researchers went into each classroom and spent time being a member of the class so when the child was asked to talk with them, the interviewers were not complete strangers. Furthermore, Irwin and Johnson (2005) recommend first building a rapport with the child participants and then conducting the interview in a place that is more comfortable for them. Along with being familiar, the researchers brought in visual aids, such as images and visual response scales. Research shows that giving the children something to focus on and use to explain what they are thinking helps the children further express themselves. For this reason, using props, like images, toys, paper, crayons, pictures, dolls, and puppets is a common tactic (Einarsdottir, 2007).

Following Slaby and Frey (1975) the images used in this research to explore gender identity included color photographs of faces and torsos of an adult man and woman, boy, girl, and boy in girls clothing. Before each question was posed to the child, the picture would be held up and the child would be asked to identify it as a man or a woman. By arranging their questions in this way, the researchers were able to directly compare distinct aspects of gender and analyze them appropriately.

In addition to using images of people as props, visual scales were utilized in case the children felt more at ease pointing to their response instead of verbally addressing it. These tactics were borrowed expressly from Hoffner (2006). For her research on children and media effects, Hoffner (2006) asked children about their favorite media character and four specific character traits to determine if they had an effect on identification. In one-on-one interviews with 155 children, one female researcher read each interview question aloud. Unlike Slaby and Frey (1975) who interviewed their participants in a lab, Hoffner used a classroom in the children's school in order to make them more comfortable and to make it easier for the students to participate. When it came time to respond, the students could either respond orally or by pointing to a visual scale that was displayed in the classroom.

Participants

Participants were males and females between the ages of 36 and 60 months (M= 47.75, SD= 8.33). A total of 25 students (16 males and 9 females) were interviewed in a quiet area in their preschool. The children were recruited from two states in the Northeastern United States. Written parental permission was obtained, as well as oral assent from the child before the start of the study. The written consent from the parents also included a short media use survey for them to fill out about their child.

Interview Procedure

Following Hoffner (2006) and Wilson and Drogos (2007) the time the researchers took in the classroom helped to build a rapport with the students. Two student interviewers went into each classroom and described the study to the students and concluded by asking for oral consent by the participants themselves. In one preschool it was a policy that the two researchers were required to spend a total of four hours in the classroom prior to the interviews to build this rapport and be familiar to the students. The children were then interviewed in a separate area of their classroom (within the same larger classroom) and asked a series of open- and close-ended questions regarding their favorite media character and their behavior at school. The questions were read aloud and the children had the option to respond orally, or by pointing to a visual scale that was printed and provided in front of them (Wilson & Drogos, 2007). No child used the visual scale for their responses. Each interview lasted less than ten minutes and upon completion the student was thanked and returned to his or her class.

Phase Two

For phase 2, an Internet survey was sent to a different population of parents and they were asked to interview their own children directly. Parents were recruited via a university listserv, social networking websites, and by students in an introductory communication course at a large northeastern university. Weber and Singer (2004) used this method of surveying parents directly to obtain information about media habits of infants and toddlers. For this study, this method was utilized due to a lack of parental support in recruiting preschoolers from their daycare center.

Sample Characteristics

A total of 178 mothers, 27 fathers, and eight guardians, participated in the online survey. Their children ranged in age from 35 months to 64 months (M= 47.58 months; SD= 8.38 months). Included in this analysis were responses from 105 boys and 108 girls.

Measures (Appendix A)

The parental survey begins the exact same way as the parental consent form from phase 1 and then gives the instructions: "For the following questions, please ASK YOUR PRE-SCHOOL AGED CHILD and record their answers." Following these instructions, all measures and prompts were the same as the interviews with the preschool aged child in their school taken by the student researchers. In short, the parents were being asked to interview their child personally. The coding of all the data from phase one and phase two was done exactly the same and by the same undergraduate researchers. Furthermore, all of the data was analyzed together and the two samples were checked for any significant differences before doing so. Any discrepancies are discussed below.

Favorite Character: Taken directly from Wilson and Drogos (2007), the favorite character discussion began by the interviewer introducing the concept by saying, or the parent reading, "TV shows and movies have lots of characters in them. Characters are people or animals that talk and move around. Can you name some characters that you've seen on TV or in movies?" (p. 11). After making sure that the preschooler has understood the concept, the interviewer or parent was instructed to ask: "Who is your favorite character?" and "What makes you like [name of character]?"

Responses were recorded verbatim. The child's explanation was then coded into categories, including those based on physical appearance (1), physical capability (2), character traits (e.g. "he's funny") (3), intellectual ability (4), social realism (5), or simply because the participant watches the program or "I don't know" (6). This coding was

completed by at least two undergraduate research assistants and the results checked for inter-rater reliability; =.88.

Wishful Identification: These items measure the extent to which children want to be like their favorite character (α = .75). Questions included, "Do you ever dress up like [name of favorite character]?" "How often?" Next, "How often do you pretend to be [name of favorite character] while playing?" and finally, "how often do you talk to [name of favorite character] while you are playing?" (Hoffner, 2006; Wilson & Drogos, 2007). Response options are: *Never* (0), *sometimes (1), pretty often (2), very often (3),* and *very very often (4).* The items were factor analyzed, which resulted in all items loading on a single factor. The results of this were used to create a wishful identification index. The two independent samples were compared on this measure using a t-test (t=1.15, df=236, p=.25). This non-significant result indicates that the samples may be combined.

Parasocial Relationships: Borrowing once again from Wilson & Drogos (2007), parasocial relationships were measured using 2 items to assess the child's parasocial interaction with his or her favorite character. In addition, five items from Rosaen and Dibble (2008) were included. These additional items were included based on a review of the extant literature on parasocial relationships and children, their high reliability, as well as the idea that it would be most beneficial to have more items on the parasocial relationship variable in order to potentially increase reliability and validity of the measure. A sample question from Wilson and Drogos includes, "How much would you like it if you could be friends with [name of favorite character]?" Would you *not like it al all (0), like it a little (1), like it pretty much (2), like it very much (3), like it very very much (4)?"* One example of the additional items is the statement, "I would invite [favorite character] to my birthday party" (Rosaen & Dibble, p. 150). Response options

to all questions were given based on a 5-item likert scale to which the students could either point, or orally respond. The items were factor analyzed, which resulted in all items loading as a single measure. Even though all items loaded onto a single factor, the reliability analysis revealed that if the question, "if something bad happens to [favorite character], I feel bad" were removed the alpha level would be higher. This was more noticeable in the data from phase one, than from phase two. This question was removed and the results of this were used to create a parasocial relationship index (α = .85). Once again the two independent samples were compared using the t-test (t=-1.23, df=233, p=.24). These non-significant results indicate that the samples are similar and can be combined.

Gender Development: The Gender Constancy Scale (Slaby & Frey, 1975) was used to evaluate gender identity. Previous research found this scale to be reliable (=.83). Materials for this scale included the use of five pictures that represented a man, woman, girl, and boy, and a boy in girls clothing. Questions in the scale reflect gender classification of the self, children, and adults (α = .78)(e.g., while looking at a boy picture, "Is this a girl or a boy?"), *stability* of gender over time (α = .76)(e.g., "When you grow up, will you be a man or a woman?"), as well as the *consistency* of gender (α = .53)(e.g., "if you wore opposite sex clothes, would you be a boy or a girl?"). The scales were evaluated for reliability and factor analyzed. The factor analysis revealed three unique factors, however, the reliability analysis revealed that by removing the question, "when you grow up will you be a mommy or a daddy?" reliability of the gender stability scale increased. T-tests were conducted to see if the independent samples could be combined. Results illustrated that for the gender identity variable (t=-.12, df=233, p=.91) and the gender stability variable (t=-.93, df=233, p=.35) the samples may be combined,

but for gender constancy ($t=-5.50$, $df=93$, $p<.01$) the samples were significantly different from one another and therefore cannot be combined in analysis.

In addition, the low reliability for the gender constancy scale is problematic. This is potentially explained by the children's age. At three years old, it is likely that the children were confused when they were asked about wearing opposite-sex clothing or playing opposite-sex games and the questions were too complex for them to respond accurately. In this case, it might be that the children gave the first answer that came to them, instead of critically responding. No conclusions were drawn from this scale in this research. The significant differences in the two samples may be related to the low reliability or explained by loss of experimental control. One potential assumption is that for these questions parents interviewing their own children did not want it to look like their child does not know the difference between images of men, women, girls, and boys and there is a chance that the participants were guided through these questions. For these reasons the gender consistency variable was dropped from this research.

Peer relationships and play: In order to understand who the child views as their best friend at school and the types of play the children engage in, the student was asked: "Who is your best friend at school?" and "What is your favorite thing to do during playtime?" Responses were recorded and coded for sex of best friend. Additionally, the child's favorite thing to do while playing was categorized into a group by activity (Make-believe play (1), physical play (2), media related (ex: watch TV[1]) (3), in-door games FEMALE (ex: tea cups; house), (4), in-door games MALE (ex: trucks)(5), in-door games GENDER NEUTRAL (ex: color; duck duck goose) (6), "don't know" or "play" (7)).

[1] This was only an option for the students who attend a day-care provider that lets the children watch television.

This coding was completed by at least two undergraduate research assistants and the results checked for inter-rater reliability, =.89.

Effects of Opposite-Sex Play. In order to understand how the children respond to opposite-sex relationships in pre-school, the children were asked a series of questions to determine the effects, if any, of their relationships. For example, if the child has opposite-sex friends, "do any other [*same sex students*] play with [*opposite sex students*] like you do?" "What do the other children think about you playing with [*opposite sex students*]?" Or if the child does not engage in opposite-sex play, "Did you used to play with [*opposite sex students*]?" If yes, "Why did you stop?" Responses were then coded into "I don't know" (1), It is inappropriate (or statements like, "because I am a boy and she is a girl")(2), "I don't like boys/girls" or "They have cooties" (3), "I grew up" (4), "They don't want to play with me" (5), "No interest" (6). This coding was completed by at least two undergraduate research assistants and the results checked for inter-rater reliability, =.84.

Children's Screen Exposure: Finally, included in the parental consent form, the parents/guardians were asked to indicate the number of minutes their child spends watching television, playing the computer, and playing video games each day of the week, and at approximately what age the child started engaging in these media options. . The parents responded that the majority of their children have been exposed to TV, computers, or video games. Only four children in the sample have never watched television. The average age when the rest of the children begin watching television was between 18-24 months (*SD*=1.88). From the children who watch television, they watch on average 45-60 minutes per day (*M*=7.24, SD=2.29). Sixty-four children (26% of the sample) had never played computer games. Of the rest of the participants, the average

age to begin playing computer games was between 35-42 months (*M*=5.18, SD=3.16), and they play between 10-20 minutes per day. Finally, 98 children (41% of the sample) have never played video games. Of the children who do, the average age to begin playing video games was between 36-42 months (*M*=4.55, SD=3.56) and they play between 5-10 minutes per day.

Chapter Four:

Analysis

Before analysis, the data were cleaned, coded, and entered into a statistical software program by two undergraduate student researchers. Cohen's Kappa for inter-rater reliability was used to assess overall, as well as independent, inter-rater reliability where appropriate. This gave an averaged score of =.87 across variables demonstrating high inter-rater reliability.

Testing the Hypotheses & Research Questions

Research Question One

For Research Question One looking into the prevalence of parasocial relationships for both preschool boys and girls, a PSR variable was calculated in order to see the range of parasocial scores (*N*=235, *M*=3.97, *SD*=.80,). With an average of close to 4 on a 5-point scale, these figures illustrate that most children in the sample are in a moderate-to-high parasocial relationship, meaning that they are invested in their favorite media character and there is a high pervasiveness of parasocial relationships in preschool.

Following this variable calculation, a t-test was conducted looking at parasocial relationships by sex of the participant. This test revealed non-significant results (t=-.92, df= 233, p=.35). These results state that both preschool boys (*M*=3.9, *SD*=.85) and preschool girls (*M*=4.02, *SD*=.75) in the sample engage in parasocial relationships.

Hypothesis One

To test hypothesis one, which asked if preschool boys will select same-sex characters as their favorite more often than girls, a chi-square analysis was run on the frequency of favorite male and female characters by sex of the participant.

Table 1

Chi-Square Analysis of Sex of the Child and Sex of the Favorite Media Character

		Sex of Favorite Media Character		Total
		Male	Female	
Sex of the Child	Male	108	13	121
	Female	40	77	117
Total		148	90	238

Results indicate that of the total 121 boys who participated, 108 of them chose male favorite characters, while only 13 of them chose female characters as their favorite. Meanwhile, of the 117 girls who participated only 40 chose male characters as their favorite while 77 chose female characters. Results show that Hypothesis 1 was supported, ^{2} = 76.71, V=.57, p < .01 and there was a significant association between sex of the participant (male/female) and whether or not they chose a male or female media character. As predicted by hypothesis 1, boys selected same sex characters as their favorite with more frequency than girls. While girls still preferred female characters, it was not to the same disproportionate extremes as boys preferring male characters.

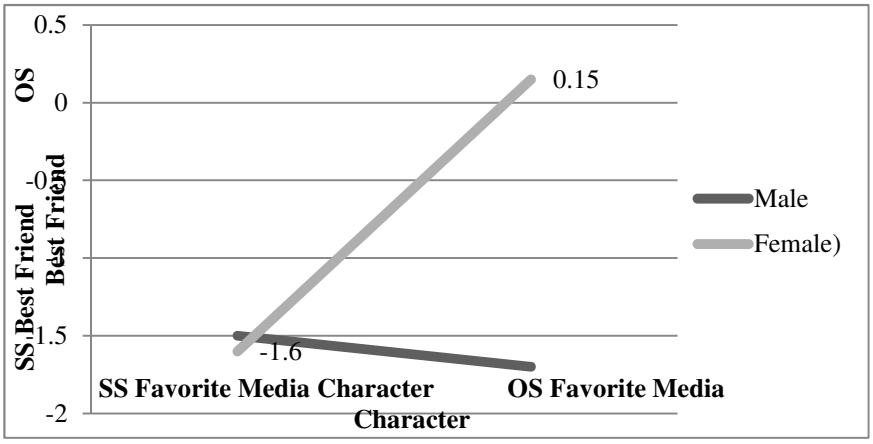
Research Question Two

Research Question Two asked whether preschool girls with male parasocial partners will be more willing to engage in play with boys as compared to preschool girls with same-sex parasocial relationships. A mean-centered regression model was run using the MODPROB (Hayes, 2011). Opposite sex favorite media character was used as the focal predictor, sex of the child as a moderator, and opposite sex of the best friend as the outcome variable. Results, F(3) = 3.62, p<.05, R2-change= .04, indicated that sex of the child was a significant moderator on sex of favorite media character and sex of the best friend (= -.74, p<.01). Further interpretations of the results reveals that for males, having a male or female favorite media character did not affect the participant's choice of a best friend in school, however, for females, there were huge effects on choice of male

or female best friend in school. Using the moderation analysis it was determined that girls who have male favorite media character are much more likely to have a male best friend in school. The same is true that if a girl has a favorite media character that is female, she is more likely to have a female best friend in school.

Table 2

Sex of child's best friend determined by sex of child's favorite media character and moderated by sex of the child



Hypothesis Two

A correlation analysis was used to test Hypothesis two. This hypothesis examined the relationship between wishful identification and parasocial relationships and was not supported (r=.06, p=.34). These results indicate that there was no significant relationship between wishful identification and PSR.

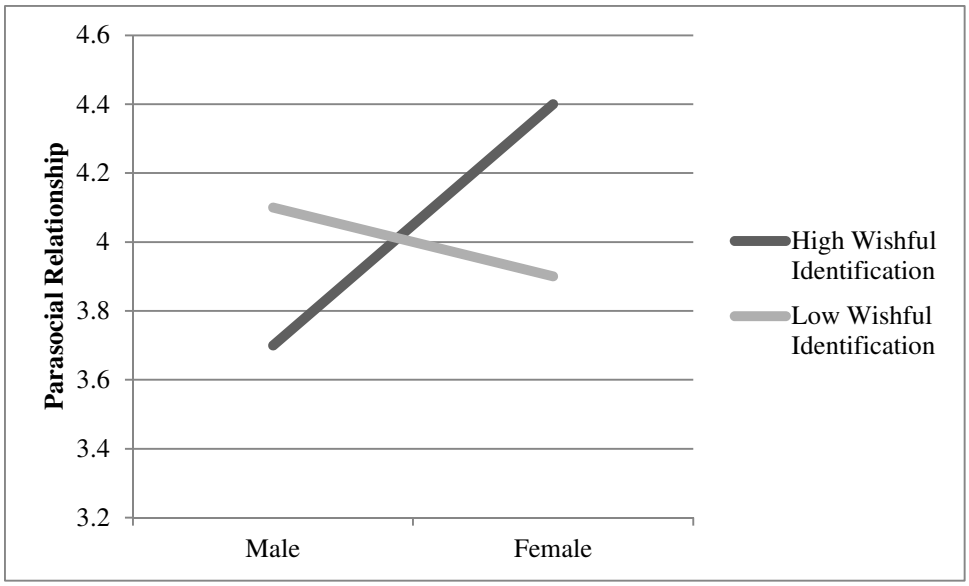
Hypothesis Three

To answer hypothesis three, which predicted that the relationship between wishful identification and parasocial relationships will differ for boys and girls a mean-centered regression model was completed looking at the sex of the child as a moderator between parasocial relationship and wishful identification (Hayes, 2011). Results, $F(3) = 2.41$, $p<.05$, R2-change= .02, indicated that sex of the child was a significant moderator on

parasocial relationship and wishful identification (= -.23, p<.05). Further investigation reveals that for boys, as wishful identification increases, parasocial relationships decrease. For girls, the exact opposite was true. The reason for this lies in the psychological differences between parasocial relationships and wishful identification. For the boys, they were forming bonds with male media characters and therefore, didn't want to be their friend, but wanted to imitate their behavior. Since the girls were also forming bonds with male characters, it is easier for them to develop relationships rather than imitate behavior because they are of opposite sex.

Table 3

Parasocial relationship determined by wishful identification and moderated by sex of the child



Research Questions Three and Four

Research Questions Three and Four looked at which individual traits of media characters (i.e. physical appearance, physical strength, intelligence, etc) predict parasocial relationships and if those traits differed for preschool aged boys and girls. First, a chi-

square analysis (^{2}= 17.90, p<.01, V=.52) was conducted to see which perceived traits predict a parasocial relationship. Results reveal that the different traits, including physical appearance, physical capability, character traits, intellectual ability, and social realism are significantly different for boys and girls meaning that the children place more importance on some traits than others and that character attributes are distinct in the participant's minds. It was found that girls, more than boys, select their favorite character based on physical appearance, whereas boys favor physical ability. Both sexes also liked characters whose dominant character trait was being "funny."

Next a mean-centered regression model was run using MODPROB (Hayes, 2011). In this analysis parasocial relationship was used at the dependent variable, reason to like favorite media character as the independent variable, and sex of the child and was used as a moderator. The data revealed F(3) = 2.56, P<.05, R2 change = .01, that sex of the child (= .24, p<.05) is a moderator such that for girls the differences in character traits were much more important then for boys, in terms of parasocial relationships. This indicates that for girls, physical appearance was a strong motivator for forming parasocial relationships. This also demonstrates that girls are unlikely to form relationships with characters on the basis of other traits, like social realism or intellectual ability.

Research Question Five

Research question five asks how peers respond to the participants engaging in parasocial relationships with opposite-sex partners. This was evaluated by a descriptive analysis of the effects of opposite-sex play and, unfortunately, there was not much usable data (*N*=189, *M*=3.48, *SD*=1.02,). The majority of the children either didn't know how

their peers felt about opposite-sex play (38%) or felt that their peers 'didn't care' about opposite-sex play (42%). Only nine children (4%) felt there were negative consequences to opposite-sex play in general and 20 children (10%) felt that the other students were fine with them having opposite-sex friends. Following this, a descriptive analysis into why the children stopped playing with opposite-sex friends (N=209, M=1.32, SD=2.34,) revealed that most of the children who used to play with opposite-sex peers and no longer do, have "no interest." Stemming from the research on play, the children in this sample no longer having an interest in opposite-sex play is likely because the games and play styles have changed as they have matured.

Research Question Six

Gender development was initially found to be comprised of three factors. As mentioned, however, *gender constancy* had a very low reliability and was dropped from all analyses. Thus, only *gender identity* and *gender stability* were retained and analyzed. This research question looks at the effects of opposite-sex parasocial relationships and opposite-sex play on a child's gender identity it was necessary to first run an analysis on the frequency of oppositive-sex parasocial relationships and opposite-sex friendships. For this, "sex of best friend" was coded into 0 for same sex and 1 for opposite sex. The same was done for "sex of favorite media character." Following this classification, an exploration into the participant's gender identity was conducted. Below are the results following Slaby and Frey (1975) indicating the percentage of boys and girls who answered both the question and the counter question "correctly" for each item in the gender development interview.

Table 4

Percentage of Boys and Girls Answering Both the Question and Counter Question

"Correctly" For Each Item in the Gender-Constancy Interview

Question Set	Male	Female	Sexes Combined
Gender Identity:			
Is this a boy or a girl (image of a boy)	100	100	100
Is this a boy or a girl (image of a girl)	100	100	100
Is this a boy or a girl (image of a boy in a dress)	17	15	16
Is this a man or a woman (image of a man)	97	99	98
Is this a man or a woman (image of a woman)	100	99	99
Are you a boy or a girl	95	97	96
Gender Stability:			
When you were a baby were you a boy or a girl	93	97	95
Were you ever the opposite sex	1	26	17
When you grow up will you be a mommy or a daddy	91	92	91
Could you ever be the opposite (mommy or daddy)	11	22	17
Average:	70.5	74.7	72.9

After these scales were evaluated, two discrete variables were created for each question set (re: "Gender Identity Variable" and "Gender Stability Variable). These were then correlated with sex of the participant using a one-tailed pearson's correlation. The data indicates a strong positive relationship between Gender Identity ($r=.74$, $p<.01$) and Gender Stability ($r=.26$, $p<.01$) with sex. These results indicate that the females in the sample exhibited stronger gender identity and stability than the males in the sample.

Following this, a multiple regression analysis ($F(2, 179)= 4.85$, $p<.01$) was conducted using opposite-sex favorite media characters (=.05, p<.01) and opposite-sex play (=-.02, p=-.05) as independent variables and gender identity as the dependent variable. Results illustrate that having an opposite-sex favorite media character is a significant predictor of gender identity, but that playing opposite-sex games is not. This means that choosing an opposite sex media character as a favorite has a direct effect on a child's understanding of their own gender identity and their perceptions of themselves as a boy or girl. Meanwhile, these results also indicate that playing opposite sex games does not.

Post-Hoc Analysis

Given that Research Question Two, stating that girls involved in opposite-sex parasocial relationships would be more willing to engage in opposite-sex games at school, was not supported, a review of the rest of the variables was done to see which variables besides parasocial relationships have an impact on predicting opposite sex friendships. Through linear regression analysis it was uncovered that age of the participant has a statistically significant effect (R^2=.02, F(1,200)=4.72, p<.05, =-.15). No other variables were significant.

Table 5

Linear Regression of Age on Opposite Sex Friendships

Age Effects on Opposite Sex Friendships. Linear Regression

	B	SE B	
Constant	.552	.165	
Opposite Sex Friendships	-.007	.003	-.152

Note R^2 = .023, p<.05.

This information coupled with the correlation of -.15 indicates that younger children are more likely to hold relationships with opposite sex friends.

Chapter Five:

Discussion

This dissertation set out to explore the role media and parasocial relationships play in the development of peer relationships and gender role development in preschool-aged children. Results offered support for Wilson and Drogos (2007) and Hoffner (2006) by demonstrating that preschool students do engage in parasocial relationships. In continued confirmation of Wilson and Drogos (2007), the current research also suggests that girls are more likely than boys to select an opposite-sex media character as their favorite. Results further indicate that the selection of a male favorite media character is correlated with a girls' decisions to choose a boy as a best friend in school. Maccoby (1998) wrote that one's preschool friends influence the development of language, culture, rules, and relationships and that these attributes become ingrained and engendered within us. As a result, an understanding of these influences is critical. According to the present study, a child's selection of a favorite media character relates to the child's choice of friends in school. These findings further support the theoretical underpinnings of information processing theory and gender schema theory demonstrating that children are receiving messages from the media and learning behavior from the media characters that impacts their interpersonal relationships and changes their demonstration of gender. By affecting who the children are friends with, and what games they play at school, opposite-sex parasocial relationships change the way that children relate to one another on the basis of sex.

Summary of the results

Having parasocial relationships and choosing favorite characters

Results confirm that children in this age group overwhelmingly engage in parasocial relationships (Research Question One). Given the amount of time children spend engaged with media, it is not a surprise that nearly every child sampled was involved in a parasocial relationship. Confirming that children engage in parasocial relationships was the first step in exploring the reasons why children choose their favorite media characters and, subsequently, how these interactions influence their real-life friendships.

The research explains that parasocial relationships are formed on the basis of identification, similarity, and attraction (Giles, 2002), and that adolescents and adults show same-sex preferences when choosing a parasocial partner (Wilson & Drogos, 2007). Grounded on the fact that children's programming is dominated by male main-characters, the current research explicated that boys are likely to select same-sex characters as their favorite. However, the data also demonstrates that, while girls still do often choose same-sex favorite media characters, they are also much more likely than boys to select opposite-sex characters as their favorite. The literature offers one explanation for this result: girls who choose male favorite media characters do so out of necessity. There are simply many more male main characters to choose from. Additionally, in our patriarchical society, these characters are often more socially desireable and so it is easy to form bonds with them. What the current research adds, however, is what that media-character selection means to the girl's interpersonal school relationships.

The relationship between wishful identification and parasocial relationships

Often discussed together with parasocial relationships, especially in children, this research showed wishful identification to not be correlated with parasocial relationships (Hypothesis three). This information is in line with previous research on parasocial relationships which argues for a strong distinction between the two concepts. Many theorists imply that parasocial relationships include a desire to emulate behavior, like wishful identification (Hoffner, 2007). Cohen (2001) and Hall et al (2007) both make the claim that parasocial relationships and wishful identification must be kept separate as a relationship pheonomenon and a psychological attachment. The present research explains that with children, wishful identification and parasocial relationships are distinct and uncorrelated. This result demonstrates that it is not necessary to have high wishful indentification in order to engage in a parasocial relationship, or vice versa.

Given that these two concepts are not correlated, Hypothesis three explores whether the relationship between wishful identification and parasocial relationships differs for boys and girls. The results were striking and once again pointed to gender as a moderating factor. Results of the analysis illustrated that for boys, as the degree of wishful identification increased, their degree of parasocial relationship decreased. Meanwhile, the inverse was true for the girls – as their degree of wishful identification decreased, their level of parasocial relationship increased.

Wishful identifcation is most simply defined as a desire to imitate a media character and be as similar to them as possible. These results help to clarify that if a child wishes to be like their favorite character, then he or she does not want to be in a relationship with the character, he or she actually wants to be that character. Conversely, when a child cannot identify with or imitate a favorite character, he or she does not want to be the character, but rather become friends with that character. This is particularly true

for girls in parasocial relationships with male media characters, as it is impossible for them to imitate the male character precisely. It may also be reasoned that this is due to gender role socialization. In our society, females are taught to form friendships, while for males there is not a strong emphasis on interpersonal skills. For boys, our society values strength, which many of the male protagonists exhibit (ex: Hercules, Simba, and Gaston to name three Disney male characters).

Summary of the final five research questions

How the sex of one's favorite media character affects peer relationships

Research question two asks if a girl is in a parasocial relationship with a male media character, would she be more likely to play with boys as compared to girls in same-sex parasocial relationships? Results positively confirmed that girls with male parasocial partners are more likely to play with boys and therefore, represents the first step in uncovering the effects of opposite-sex parasocial relationships. It is possible that, for girls who choose boys as best friends and who select as favorite games those traditionally favored by boys, their opposite-sex parasocial relationships have led them to become more comfortable playing male games and engaging in male culture. It may also be worth exploring if this relationship goes the other way – children who are friends with opposite-sex peers are more likely to select opposite-sex media characters as favorite. A limitation to the present study is that the data collected is correlational and so we were unable to determine order That being said, research shows children as young as two years old have favorite media characters when they may not have a best friend, or be in school. Therefore, there is support for the media impacting friend selection.

Similarly, according to one study on children and consumerism, 97 percent of children under the age of 6 own toys and other consumer products associated with their

favorite character (Rideout, Vandewater & Wartella, 2003). Another study reports that children in this age group engage in make-believe play with their favorite media characters and dress-up like the characters (Wilson & Drogos, 2007). Thus, playing games and imagining new worlds is a common way that children relate to, and engage with, their favorite media characters. Consequently, it would be natural for children to continue to engage in this behavior and interact with other children who are playing make-believe and dressing up as the very same character. In this way, a girl's parasocial relationships with male characters give her the tools necessary to relate and engage with the boys in her classroom. This is precisely what Maccoby (1998) is talking about when she discusses sex-segregated play creating two co-cultures where boys and girls can no longer relate to one another because they lack the tools. The present research demonstrates that parasocial relationships may be the link for children to relate to one another. This being true, it will have large impacts on opposite-sex relationships in the long run because the sexes would not be seperated at this crucial time in their development.

Further insight into this area will be critical to understanding how a child's relationships are impacted by this changing environment. Traditionally, friendship groups in preschool and kindergarten are formed on the basis of sex (Fabes, Martin & Hanish, 2004). At this age, concepts of gender constancy begin to take hold in children's understanding of sex, both their own and that of others. Therefore, it makes sense that children at this age would begin to gravitate towards other children who share that same experience and understanding of their own gender. By introducing media characters to this relationship, children can form bonds with opposite-sex media characters and more easily start opposite-sex relationships. By the time such a child has reached gender

constancy she can identify with the opposite sex better than she might have with only same-sex parasocial relationship experience.

Another area where a shared or common experience often leads to opposite-sex friendships is in neighborhood relationships based on proximity. In these relationships children become friends with one another because they live on the same street and, therefore, have repeated opportunities for similar experiences. Because these children can relate on levels of convenience and proximity, their relationship can transcend their gender. What differentiates a parasocial relationship from a neighborhood relationship is that research shows that children bring the media and their favorite characters with them to the classroom in ways that they might not be able to do with their neighborhood friends. By bringing in merchandise, or even their imaginary game with them to school, children bring their parasocial relationships into the classroom and therefore, set up a new common ground that is not gender-based.

Most attractive character traits in a media character for boys and girls

Once again following in Hoffner's (2006) footsteps, this research focused on which character traits children would be most attracted to and would lead to a parasocial relationship (Research Question Three). In line with Hoffner (2006), the leading reason why a child chose a female character as his or her favorite was because of physical appearance, however, the leading reason to select a male character was due to his personality (i.e., the character is "funny"). On the other hand, the second leading reason to prefer a male character was because of physical strength (Research Question Four). This was six times higher for male characters than female characters. These results are somewhat different from Hoffner's findings as her subjects were interested in the "intelligence" of the male characters and not whether or not they were "funny."

While not shocking, these findings confirm anecdotal evidence by pointing to larger societal issues: we value physical strength in males and physical appearance in females. However, it is necessary to point out that "physical appearance" does not necessarily imply beauty, even though in most cases the participant chose the character because she was "pretty," or the participant "liked her hair." Even so, this does show that that media characters are designed to highlight physical appearance in females and physical strength in males even in children's programming. Gender schema theory explains that children develop an understanding of their own gender, in part, through depictions in the media. With the media stressing the importance of physical appearance in females and "funny" and physically strong characteristics in males, children's opinions of male and female are being constructed with these at the center. These traits then create social norms and ideals, which are largely impossible to conform to.

Effects of opposite-sex parasocial relationships on peer relationships and gender identity

As a final step, this dissertation set out to understand if there were any negative effects on the children's interpersonal relationships resulting from engaging in opposite-sex parasocial relationships (Research Question Five). Unfortunately, the data collected on this was minimal. This resulted in a limitation to the present study. Perhaps the questions that were asked ("What do the other children think about you playing with [*opposite sex students*]?"), or the way they were presented to the children, did not make sense to children so young. It may also be that the children lack awareness of how their peers feel about them. At this stage children are still egocentric and have yet to learn how to see from another's perspective. According to Piaget, perspective-taking ability doesn't solidify until the concrete operational period. Either way, one-third of the sample

responded that they are unaware of how their peers feel about them playing with opposite-sex friends and another third of the sample simply "didn't know." When asked if, and why, the participants stopped playing with opposite-sex friends most replied that they no longer had any interest.

The final research question (Research Question Six) asked about the effects of opposite-sex parasocial relationships and subsequent opposite-sex play on a child's gender identity. Results indicated that parasocial relationships have a direct effect on the gender identity variable. While not heavily researched, the author has previously found this relationship when studying adults as well rendering these results in children not altogether surprising (Kurtin, 2012). The relationship between PSR and gender identity demonstrates the importance of these media relationships and extends previous research by illustrating the similarities between parasocial relationships and interpersonal relationships.

Previous research has shown parasocial relationships to be a moderator between identification and gender identity in adults (Kurtin, 2012). While this dissertation did not specifically study this relationship, it is likely to be the same for children. As identification increases, the child begins to see him- or herself as more like the character, therefore potentially influencing his or her understanding of his or her own gender. In this dissertation, parasocial relationships were shown to have an effect on gender identity while engaging in opposite-sex play was not. This highlights the important finding that children's media relationships influence their own understanding of gender and behavior. This points to the importance of media selection for children and the continued importance of understanding media's effects on children.

Age effects of parasocial relationships with opposite-sex media characters on playing opposite-sex games

A post-hoc analysis revealed that younger children, specifically girls, were more likely to hold opposite-sex parasocial relationships and play opposite-sex games in school than older children. This finding leads to an assumption that the children are aging out of media effects on friend selection. Results suggest the conclusion that, as children mature, they learn more about societal gender norms and begin to comply with them. At this point, not even parasocial relationships possess the resiliency to break the pressure to comply with gender norms. It may also be the case that, as children mature, their gender constancy becomes more ingrained and they find that they have more in common with same-sex peers because of shared experiences.

Chapter Six:

Limitations

There were a few notable limitations to the present study. To start, due to time constraints and difficulty in accessing child participants in the field, two methods of data collection were utilized. Asking parents to interview their own children was necessary but resulted in a loss of experimental control. However, this concern is minimized as the scores between the groups did not differ significantly on any measures other than gender constancy, which was removed from analysis.

Second, there was a broader threat to external validity and generalizability. This study was not a true random sample. Participants were either directly recruited based on geographic location, or they were solicited on a baby-centered discussion board. These participants all volunteered to be a part of the study so results may not generalize to the broader population of pre-school age children. Future work should endeavor to recruit a more representative sample of the pre school population.

Third, the current study assumed that due to the children's current age, their age when they started watching television, and their age when they started school, that the children in the study would have selected a favorite media character prior to selecting a best friend in school. However, without longitudinal data, it is not possible to know whether favorite media character or best friend came first. This issue is addressed in the next chapter which discusses future directions.

Chapter Seven:

Implications for future research

This dissertation suggests a number of avenues for subsequent research. Chief among them would be to continue the present study in a longitudinal design, alleviating one of the limitations of the study. In this way children would be questioned throughout their first year of school, and then throughout their entire preschool career as well, in order to watch their degree of gender constancy and their friendships become more mature. This would also allow the research to track the friendship and parasocial relationships in tandem to look for additional effects and ordering. A longitudinal study would also allow the assumptions of Research Question Four to be put to the test, as the above process would show whether children do indeed mature out of the media's effect on friend selection. In this research, the children who stopped playing with the opposite-sex indicated that they "no longer have an interest" in such play. A longitudinal study might demonstrate that over time, these children spend more time with their same-sex peers, resulting in a stronger pull by the societal gender rules of same-sex play.

Future research could also extend the age range examined in this study by looking at early elementary school aged children. The present research demonstrated that the media plays a role in who children choose as their friends. Specifically with girls, this research shows the media may increase the likelihood of the selection of an opposite-sex best friend in preschool. However, Fabes, Martin & Hanish (2004) reported that while preschoolers are three times more likely to interact with same-sex peers, children around the age of six were even more likely to do so. Given how much more likely kindergarteners are than preschoolers to select a same-sex friend, it would be interesting to see how the media impacts their decisions.

Extending this research into kindergarten would also permit further investigation into cognitive complexity. It would be valuable to use a cognitive complexity scale, like the Role Category Questionnaire (O'Keefe, Shepard & Streeter, 1982), in order to dive further into the development of e children's gender schemas. An additional scale to add to use in future research would be the Bem Sexual Role Inventory (1974). While controversial, this scale measures masculinity, femininity, and androgyny and was originally used with children. This test has the potential to indicate whether a child's sexual role is a mediator or moderator of friend choice or favorite type of play. Generally, this scale can be used in two ways. More traditionally, the Bem Sexual Role inventory could be used to measure where the child currently scores on the androgyny scale. This scale may also be used to measure the children's aspirational gender. This too may give insight into the child's gender development and the role it plays in the selection of both favorite media characters and school friends.

An additional avenue for future research is the role of the family in media selection. This would include the role of parents in mediation and show selection, as well as the parents' own enactment of gender roles and reinforcement. It is true that once children enter school the parental ability to restrict media in the home diminishes, but it remains important to untangle the role of the media in the home wherever possible. In the same way, it is also valuable to understand what lessons the parents teach about gender. Interpersonal scholars argue that the family is the most important agent for teaching children about gender (see: Guerrero, Jones, & Boburka, 2006; Lytton & Romney, 1991; Maccoby, 1998; Martin & Ruble, 2004; Zosuls et al, 2009). Therefore, understanding the lessons parent give and the role models they portray will help elucidate if children select favorite media characters based on gender or role preferences.

Continuing with family influence, siblings may also play a large role in gender identification and media selection. To start, it may be interesting to learn how many children are in the home as well as the sex of those children as these may contribute to a given child's gender identity. For example, if a little girl has an older brother, then perhaps she watches stereotypically male shows and forms relationships with male characters as a way to bond with or imitate her brother. This scenario would not only influence her media selection, but also perhaps help foster unique gender role socialization. A similar result could occur in relation to birth order. Thus, it would be relevant to compare the effects of an older sibling on gender identity and media selection with those of a younger sibling. Clearly, children with opposite-sex siblings must engage in opposite-sex play if they want to play with their siblings, but the degree to which engages in opposite-sex play may be dependent on birth order.

Finally, this research could be expanded into different media such as movies and video games. The current research focused on television and television characters because that is where parasocial research has primarily been housed. However, anecdotally, children in this age group often watch the same movies repeatedly and, of course, the youngest children probably cannot discern a movie from a television show. Thus, after watching the same movie multiple times, it should be possible for a young child to form a relationship with that character. Further, by introducing movies into this research it opens the field to Disney movies, which could be extremely interesting given their gender representations throughout their films. Disney also represents an interesting avenue to study because the female protagonists range from being stereotypically female, wearing fancy ball gowns (ex: the women in Cinderella and Beauty and the Beast) to being more androgynous or even masculine (ex: Mulan).

Just like movies, video games open up a new world to this research. Results from this study revealed that nearly 60% of preschool children play video games and that the average age to start playing was between 36-42 months old. While it is likely that children will engage in wishful identification with a television character, a result illustrated by the present research, first-person video games are designed to actually put the player in the position of the character. This design choice blurs the line between fantasy and reality even further. In addition, video games are an increasingly important media outlet for this generation of children, and the research into parasocial relationships, wishful identification, and gender development needs to begin to understand their effects.

Chapter Eight:

Conclusion

President Obama made known preschool's importance to our nation's future. This dissertation outlined the importance of interpersonal relationships in preschool, the influence of the media on preschool students, the impact that preschool has on children's gender identity, and how relationships with media characters affect all of these things. There has been a long history of research discussing preschool students, gender identity, and sex-segregated play (e.g. Fabes, Martin & Hanish, 200; Maccoby, 1998; Zosuls, et al., 2009). Children's preferences in this area are socially ingrained and learned through interpersonal channels. The present research, like many before, sought to include the media as an influence in gender development and play (e.g. Hoffner, 2008; Hust & Brown, 2008; Meyer, Murphy, Cascardi & Birns, 1991). These results show preschool students selecting opposite-sex media characters as their favorite and engaging in parasocial relationships with these characters. These relationships then influence the friendships that the students have in school and lead to girls selecting opposite-sex best friends more frequently than they otherwise would. At a basic level, friendships are bonds between people; relationships with media characters give children, regardless of their sex, something to bond over because they can relate to each other on a level that transcends sex.

This research has considerable implications for potential future relationships of these children. Maccoby (1998) claims that the relationships we have in preschool form language, culture, and norms for behavior, and that those stay with us through life. This implies that a primary difference between the adult sexes arises from the fact that men and women didn't play together as children. In other words, men and women lack those

foundational shared interests and experiences that begin from the earliest social interactions. The present research indicates that this assumption may not always be true. It states that where children today watch more television than even ten years ago (Rideout & Hamel, 2006) and bond with the characters in their favorite shows, they may be more open to form relationships with opposite-sex peers. If a boy and a girl bonded over a shared favorite media character, perhaps the resulting man and woman will both be from Jupiter rather than Venus or Mars.

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Appendix

"Hello, my name is [insert name] and I am from the University of Connecticut, do you ever watch TV or movies? Do you have a favorite? I do! I was wondering if you would like to talk to me about your favorite TV characters? We will come right back here when we are done. You don't have to answer any questions you do not want to. Do you have any questions? Do you still want to talk?"

[participant name and number: _____]

[sex of participant: Male (1), Female (2)

Interview Questions:

1. How old are you? _____
2. Do you like to watch TV, movies, or play video games? No (1), Yes (2)
3. What is your favorite TV show or movie to watch?

   _____

[If the child says "I don't know" or says "I don't have one." Prompt: "Is there a character that you like a lot?" _____"Who is that? _____." If the child says no, ask "Who is the first character you can think of? _____."] (this character will be used as "favorite.")

"TV shows and movies have lots of characters in them. Characters are people or animals that talk and move around. Can you name some characters that you've seen on TV or in movies?" Then ask:

4. Who is your favorite character?

[If the child says "I don't know" or says "I don't have one." Prompt: "Is there a character that you like a lot?" _____"Who is that? _____." If the child says no, ask "Who is the first character you can think of? _____."] (this character will be used as "favorite.")

5. Is [name of character] a boy or a girl? (Boy (1), Girl (2))
6. What makes you like [name of character]?" If the participant says, "I don't know," follow up with prompts: Because they are funny? Smart? Pretty? Strong? Remind you

of someone? Do fun stuff? Etc. (This list will be added to as we learn more about what the children need)

7. Sometimes kids put on special clothes or a costume so they look like their favorite character. How often do you dress up like [*name of favorite character*]?

Responses: Never (1), sometimes (2), pretty often (3), very often (4), very very often (5).

8. How often do you pretend to be [*name of favorite character*] while playing?

Responses: Never (1), sometimes (2), pretty often (3), very often (4), very very often (5).

9. How much would you like it if you could be friends with [*name of favorite character*]? Would you:

Responses: Not like it at all (1), like it a little (2), like it pretty much (3), like it very much (4), like it very very much (5).

10. How much would you like it if [*name of favorite character*] went to your school? Would you:

Responses: Not like it at all (1), like it a little (2), like it pretty much (3), like it very much (4), like it very very much (5).

11. [*Name of favorite character*] would fit in well with your group of friends

Responses: Very wrong (1), wrong (2), I don't know (3), right (4), very right (5)

12. If something happens to [*Name of favorite character*], would you feel bad

Responses: Very wrong (1), wrong (2), I don't know (3), right (4), very right (5)

13. Would you would invite [*Name of favorite character*] to your birthday party

Responses: Very wrong (1), wrong (2), I don't know (3), right (4), very right (5)

14. [*Name of favorite character*] is the kind of person you would like to play or hang out with

Responses: Very wrong (1), wrong (2), I don't know (3), right (4), very right (5)

15. If [*Name of favorite character*] lived in my neighborhood you would be friends

Responses: Very wrong (1), wrong (2), I don't know (3), right (4), very right (5)

For this next section, we are going to look at a few pictures and answer questions about them.

16.  Is this a boy (1) or a girl (2)?

17.  Is this a boy (1) or a girl (2)?

18.  Is this a boy (1) or a girl (2)?

19.  Is this a man (1) or a woman (2)?

20.  Is this a man (1) or a woman (2)?

21. Are you a boy (1) or a girl (2)?

22. Are you a (1)  or a (2)  ?

23. When you were a baby, were you a little boy (1) or a little girl (2)?

24. Were you ever [*opposite sex of what they are*]?

Responses: No (1), Yes (2)

25. When you grow up, will you be a mommy (1) or a daddy (2)?

26. Could you ever be a [*opposite of last response*]?

Responses: No (1), Yes (2)

27. If you wore [*opposite sex of what they are*] clothing would you be a boy or a girl?

Responses: No (1), Yes (2)

28. If you played [*opposite sex of what they are*] games, would you be a boy (1) or a girl (2)?

29. Could you be [*opposite sex of what they are*] if you wanted to be?

Responses: No (1), Yes (2)

30. If yes, would that be:

Responses: Real life (1), make-believe (2)

31. If the answer to 26 was make-believe, ask your child if they could ever be the opposite sex in real life

Responses: No (1), Yes (2)

"My last questions are about school."

32. Who is your best friend at school? [respond with name and gender; if unsure on gender, ask]

Responses: Male (1), female (2)

33. What is your favorite thing to do during play time at school?

_____

If the child's best friend is of the opposite-sex:

34. "Do lots of [*same sex students*] play with [*opposite sex students*] like you do?"

Responses: Yes (1), No (2)

35. "What do the other children think about you playing with [*opposite sex students*]?"

Responses: It's bad (1), they hate it (2), I don't know (3), they don't care (4), it is cool (5)

If the child does not engage in opposite-sex play:

36. "Did you used to play with [*opposite sex students*]?"

Responses: No (1), Yes (2)

37. If yes, "Why did you stop"?

_____

"Thank you so much for talking to me. Let's go back to your class now."