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BRIEF REPORT

Identification With Characters in Parasocial Relationships Predicts Sharing Their Personality Traits

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With the advent of modern technology, the idea of what relationships can be has shifted. This shift has facilitated parasocial relationships, which are characterized by a media viewer's one-sided relationship to a media figure. The current study examines the relation between identification with different characters in a television show and self-reported measures of personality. Self-report survey data were collected from 829 fans of the television show *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. In this show, the 6 principal characters each embody a positive personality trait (e.g., kindness, loyalty). Participants reported their identification with each of the 6 major characters on the show using the Inclusion of Other in the Self measure and completed personality measures capturing the traits associated with each character. We found that, for most traits, identification with the character that embodied a given personality trait was the strongest predictor of a person scoring high in that trait. Fans of particular characters may tend to exhibit the traits of those characters, whether because they are drawn to characters who resemble themselves or because they modulate their personalities to match characters with whom they identify.

Public Policy Relevance Statement
Each character in the animated series *My Little Pony* embodies a particular personality trait (e.g., loyalty, generosity). We surveyed fans of the series and had them complete personality assessments, and found that fans who identified most with specific characters were most likely to have the same personality traits that the characters embodied. This gives insight into how people's relationship with media figures can influence and be influenced by their sense of who they are.

Keywords: parasocial relationships, self-expansion, personality

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Belonging, connecting with others, is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Throughout most of human history, experiencing this connection required face-to-face interpersonal interaction. With the advent of new media such as radio, television, and the Internet, new avenues for the experience of belonging emerged: parasocial relationships, or relationships between a media viewer and a character or media figure (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Although these relationships are inherently one-sided, the connections fostered via parasocial interaction—by watching or reading media—are often experienced as personally meaningful (Giles, 2002). The more a viewer consumes content about a character, increasing their parasocial interaction, the greater the potential of a deep parasocial relationship forming (Brown et al., 2003). These relationships can be fostered in myriad ways, such as regularly listening to a local newscaster, following a favorite celebrity on Twitter, binge-watching a show online, or repeatedly rereading a favorite book. Like face-to-face relationships, parasocial relationships can form a central part of a person's identity.

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As a consequence of increasing "screen time" and virtual media consumption (Nielsen Total Audience Report, 2019), parasocial relationships may be becoming more common, with their influence on the viewer extending beyond their initial medium. More time on smartphones, computers, and televisions affords more opportunity to spend time with media figures, which in turn increases the likelihood that a parasocial relationship may form (Giles, 2002; Rubin et al., 1985). Longer-running series such as *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, and *How I Met Your Mother* build relationships with the viewer by being present each week over several years and becoming part of a viewer's routine. Particularly strong parasocial relationships can induce strong emotional responses and affect well-being; for example, when a character in a show dies or when a series concludes, viewers sometimes react as though they had lost a friend (Cohen, 2009). Thus, despite their basis in an objectively unidirectional experience, parasocial relationships can impact mood, behavior, and feelings of loneliness in daily life (Basil, 1996; Schiappa et al., 2007).

Media figures can extend beyond the bounds of their medium through fandoms, groups that center around a specific show, book, or medium and cultivate content around their central interest (Giles, 2003). Fandoms can transform a relationship that is initially passive and make it active by making the viewer feel that they are able to interact with the universe the character inhabits. Although the possibility of directly interacting with the character may not increase (especially for relationships with fantasy characters who lack real-life counterparts), participating in conventions and online forums increases feelings of connection and identification with the characters (Giles, 2002; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016). The more someone is involved with the fandom, the more closely connected they will feel to the parasocial entity around which that fandom is centered (Fraser & Brown, 2002). These feelings of closeness translate to the feeling that the characters and stories are more meaningful (Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2017).

When identification with a character is particularly strong, a viewer may even develop values, beliefs, and personality traits that align with those of the character (Giles, 2002; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). For example, children have been shown to value traits embodied by characters with which they identify more than traits that those characters do not embody (Hoffner, 1996), and when people identify with characters who are morally ambiguous or immoral, they engage in moral disengagement with the actions of those characters (Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016). Moreover, when a character exhibits traits that the viewer does not have, viewers sometimes exhibit wishful identification, the desire to emulate those traits (Hoffner, 1996). For example, boys may act more aggressively to emulate their favorite video game characters (Bond & Drogos, 2014), and young adults who identify with promiscuous television personalities may adopt attitudes consistent with those characters' actions (Konijn et al., 2007). In a more extreme example, some Elvis impersonators try to embody the values, actions, and look of Elvis outside of performance contexts (Fraser & Brown, 2002). Thus, when a viewer has developed a strong bond with a character, the viewer's perception of their own traits could change to become more consistent with those of the character.

The current study, then, seeks to understand whether identification with media characters predicts personality—specifically, the traits that characters embody. To examine this question, we surveyed avid fans of the television series *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, asking them a battery of questions assessing their own traits and their relationships with characters from the show. In this show, the six principal characters each canonically—that is, according to the official story of the show—embody a positive personality trait (generosity, kindness, etc.; Edwards et al., 2019). Thus, we reasoned that this show, with its wide range of represented traits, would yield insight into the phenomenon of parasocial relationships. We expected that, the greater a viewer's identification with a given character, the more they would report having the personality trait exhibited by that character.

Method

Participants

Fans of the show *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* were targeted for participation. Recruitment materials were posted in chatrooms on the social media platform Discord and on a fan news website, Equestria Daily. Participants were compensated by being entered into a drawing to win an autographed poster.

The recruitment process yielded 1,518 people; of these, 829 (M_{age} = 23.8) completed the study. In contrast to stereotypes about the show as primarily for girls (Valiente & Rasmusson, 2015), 78.7% of participants identified as male (M_{age} = 24.2), 15.9% identified as female (M_{age} = 22.4), 2.2% identified as nonbinary/third gender (M_{age} = 21.9), 0.8% elected to self-describe their gender (M_{age} = 25.9), and 23 participants declined to state their gender (M_{age} = 23.4); 77.4% of participants indicated that they were white, 10.1% Asian/Pacific-Islander, 6.4% Hispanic/Latinx, 0.9% Black/African American, 0.8% Native American/American Indian, and 0.9% another ethnicity. These demographics are consistent with those observed in previous research examining fans of this show (Reysen et al., 2017).

Materials

Participants' identification with each character was measured using the Inclusion of Other in the Self scale (IOS; Aron et al., 1992). As indicated earlier, the main characters embody distinct prosocial qualities: humor, generosity, loyalty, honesty, kindness, and friendship correspond to Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Rainbow Dash, Applejack, Fluttershy, and Twilight Sparkle, respectively. We selected one well-validated scale to measure each quality.

Humor was measured using the Need for Humor scale (Cline et al., 2003), which includes 12 items (Cronbach's α = .85) such as "I often feel the need to make other people laugh." G*enerosity* was assessed with the Interpersonal Generosity Assessment (Brown, 2011), which includes 10 items (α = .87) such as "When it comes to my personal relationships with others, I am a very generous person." *Loyalty* was measured using the Loyalty subscale (α = .70) of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ; Graham et al., 2011), which comprises six items such as "People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong." *Honesty* was assessed in an indirect way using the 13-item (α = .63) Social Desirability Scale (Marlow & Crowne, 1961). We reasoned that, as socially desirable responses on the Marlow–Crowne scale are inherently less than honest, a reverse-scored version of this scale would assess participants' honesty.

Kindness was measured by 10 items (α = .75) taken from the Kindness Scale (Comunian, 1998), such as "I am kind because I believe in respecting the dignity of others." Last, *friendship* (positioned, in the show, as superordinate to the other qualities) was assessed with the Friendship Scale (Hawthorne & Griffith, 2000), which comprised five items (α = .62) such as "I find it easy to get along with people."

Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants completed the six individual difference measures, then the IOS scale for each of the six characters. Included in the loyalty measure was an attention check taken from the MFQ (participants failing this check were excluded from analysis). Last, participants reported demographic information and were shown a debriefing statement.

Results

Character Identification Predicting Personality

To examine the central hypothesis of the study—that character identification would predict the corresponding traits most strongly—a series of multiple regression analyses were conducted.

Multiple Regressions

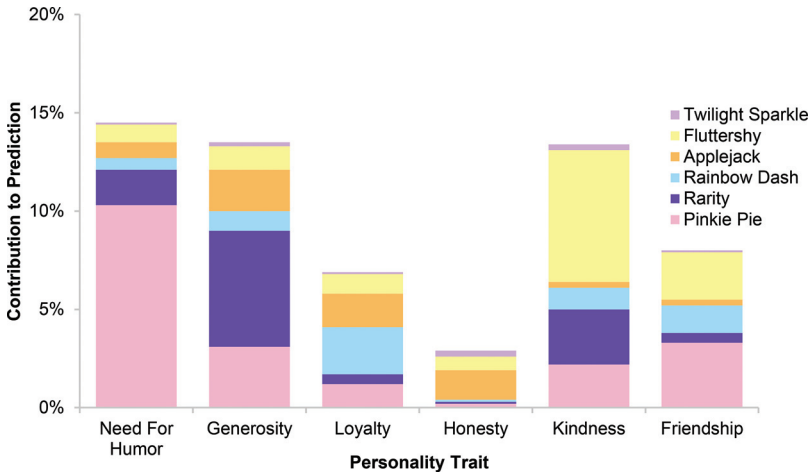
Six multiple regressions were performed to predict each of the personality traits from identification with each character. All six regression models yielded significant collective effects, all $F(6, 828) \geq 3.037$, all $p < .01$, all $R^2 \geq .022$ (see online supplemental materials for full descriptions of these models). To test the central hypothesis, that identification with a given character is particularly predictive of the personality trait that character embodies, the regression coefficients within each model were examined. Indeed, for four of the six traits, identification with the characters who embody them was the strongest predictor of the trait: identification with Pinkie Pie predicted need for humor (β = .329, $p < .001$), identification with Rarity predicted generosity (β = .202, $p < .001$), identification with Rainbow Dash predicted loyalty (β = .139, $p < .001$), and identification with Fluttershy predicted kindness (β = .284, $p < .001$). Friendship, in the context of the show, is treated as a superordinate trait (hence the show's name), and the results for friendship were not clearly linked to the corresponding character (Twilight Sparkle); identification with Fluttershy ($\beta = -.148$, $p < .001$) and Pinkie Pie (β = .200, $p < .001$) were significant predictors. Last, honesty was predicted by identification with Applejack ($\beta = -.082$, p = .026) and Fluttershy ($\beta = -.098$, p = .008).

Dominance Analyses

As identification with the various characters was intercorrelated, multicollinearity is a concern when conducting multiple regression analyses. Accordingly, dominance analysis (Azen & Budescu, 2003) was used to examine the relative weights of the predictors. In dominance analysis, correlations are algorithmically performed with varying combinations of predictor variables to assess changes in R^2 values, or changes in amount of variance explained. This is done by tabulating the variance explained of every possible permutation of independent variables (starting with inclusion of every variable) and analyzing changes in variance as variables are systematically removed, the all-subsets regression approach. Permutations are then reduced to ultimately include only a single variable in assessing amount of variance explained. Note that dominance analysis provides that the variance explained for each predictor variable sums to the variance explained by the multiple regressions. *Complete dominance* is said to occur when a predictor explains the most variance in the outcome variable at every level of the analysis, which constitutes strong evidence that it is the strongest predictor. Thus, we were able to determine the relative weights that our predictor variables contribute to our predicted variables (character identification and personality in both directions) as well as whether a single variable was the strongest predictor (Figure 1; Tables 1 and 2).

Figure 1

Relative Contributions of Character Identification Predicting Personality



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Table 1
Zero-Order Correlation Between IOS Measures of Character Identification and Measures of Personality

Measure	Need for humor	Generosity	Loyalty	Honesty	Kindness	Friendship
Pinkie Pie	(.336***)	.228***	.135***	−.049	.208***	.209***
Rarity	.168***	(.288***)	.104**	−.012	.231***	.093**
Rainbow Dash	.115***	.132***	(.189***)	−.017	.133***	.135***
Applejack	.141***	.170***	.178***	(−.094**)	.110**	.074*
Fluttershy	−.012	.211***	.117***	−.115***	(.333***)	−.084*
Twilight Sparkle	.020	.092**	.050	−.058	.110**	(.022)

Note. Parentheses indicate traits that correspond to each character. IOS = Inclusion of Others in the Self scale.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

As shown, a general trend is observed that suggests that identification with each character for their respective trait accounted for a larger portion of the variance explained by the measures of character identification. Identification with Pinkie Pie accounted for a majority of the variance in the need for humor model and completely dominated identification with other characters. Identification with Rarity accounted for the largest portion of variance in the model for generosity and completely dominated identification with other characters. Identification with Rainbow Dash accounted for the largest portion of variance in the model for loyalty and completely dominated identification with other characters. Identification with Fluttershy accounted for half of the total variance in the model for honesty, completely dominating identification with the other characters, followed by identification with Applejack. Identification with Fluttershy also accounted for a majority of the variance in the model for kindness and completely dominated identification with other characters. Identification with Pinkie Pie accounted for a majority of the variance in the model for friendship and completely dominated identification with other characters.

Discussion

The current study shows that among the members of the *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* fandom, character identification and personality are linked. Specifically, identification with characters that embodied personality traits generally predicted high levels of those traits. These findings support the possibility that, at least for parasocial relationships that occupy an important role in people's lives, identification with characters might influence either personality traits or self-perception of those traits.

As noted earlier, the cross-sectional design of the study does not enable it to identify causality, so it is also possible that having particular personality traits motivates participants to identify with characters that embody those traits. This direction of relationship is also theoretically plausible and consistent with extant research on parasocial relationships (Bui, 2017; Hoffner, 1996), as people are more likely to develop parasocial relationships with characters with which they are similar. Indeed, it is reasonable to believe that both directions of causality operate concurrently, resulting in a recursive relationship in which identification and personality influence one another. A longer term longitudinal study could clarify the directionality and time course of these effects.

The study had other limitations. Notably, most measures were self-report, and so social desirability and demand characteristics could have distorted the observed relationships. To facilitate participant recruitment, the personality traits were measured using the most concise viable measures that could be identified, and it is possible that a more comprehensive assessment of personality would have yielded different results. In addition, the operationalization of honesty as the inverse of social desirability reflects the trait it was meant to measure less closely and was the only "behavioral" measure of personality in the study. Indeed, it yielded results that differed from those of other traits. Friendship, too, yielded results inconsistent from the other traits, although this can more likely be explained by the overarching importance of friendship in the show's mapping of traits to characters.

The members of the *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* fandom exemplify the concept of parasocial relationships quite well: the show is long-running, the fandom has a robust history of online and in-person interaction, and the characters have clearly defined personae that make the meaning of identifying with them evident

Table 2
Summary of Dominance Analyses Relative Weights for Personality Predicted by Character Identification

Character identification	Need for humor	Generosity	Loyalty	Honesty	Kindness	Friendship
Pinkie Pie	(.097a)	.026	.008	.001	.020	.037a
Rarity	.014	(.051a)	.003	.001	.028	.004
Rainbow Dash	.005	.005	(.024a)	<.001	.007	.010
Applejack	.011	.012	.020	(.007)	.003	.003
Fluttershy	.005	.026	.008	.011a	(.086a)	.015
Twilight Sparkle	.001	.002	.001	.002	.004	(<.001)
Total R^2	.133	.124	.063	.022	.148	.069
F	21.022***	19.457***	9.164***	3.037**	23.889***	10.109***

Note. Parentheses indicate traits that correspond to each character.
[a] Completely dominates other sources of character identification.
** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

to viewers. However, it is unclear how representative this fandom is of fandoms in general, and whether parasocial relationships in other contexts operate in a similar way is unknown. Future studies of parasocial relationships that use more generalizable samples (e.g., a survey of a nationally representative sample in which participants have the option to identify a relationship that is meaningful to them) would inform the question of how common such relationships are across a range of demographic groups.

Parasocial relationships will likely become more prevalent and more important. Although, in the past, interacting with artwork, buildings, and religious symbols may have enabled a form of these relationships, the increase in the breadth and depth of media exposure (Nielsen Total Audience Report, 2019; https://www.nielsen.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/04/q3-2018-total-audience-report.pdf) facilitates and catalyzes them. Virtual assistants such as Siri or Alexa allow people to engage with technology and media in ways that were not possible before, perhaps even evolving from being perceived as a tool to acting as something of a companion. At the time of writing, Alexa will respond to the question, "Are we friends?" with the statement, "I am happy to be your friend." These technologies can also reduce the need to interact with people to acquire goods and services; people can order most consumer products, including food, directly to their door without interacting with a person. Given this, the study of parasocial relationships—how people build different kinds of meaningful relationships in a world in which their interactions with others are increasingly mediated, and even replaced, by technology—is an important and emerging subject of research.

In this study, we demonstrated that identification with characters is associated with personality. This finding reinforces and extends existing theories of parasocial relationships, providing evidence that identification at the character level links to distinct personality traits. We suggest that in a sociocultural landscape that is increasingly mediated through media, the study of parasocial relationships will become increasingly important.

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