Viewer Aggression and Homophily, Identification, and Parasocial Relationships With Television Characters

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This study examined the antecedents of viewer relationships experienced with television characters. Based on social cognitive theory, we considered how trait aggression helped explain identification, homophily, and parasocial interaction with aggressive characters. Two hundred nineteen participants completed questionnaires measuring trait aggression and relationships with one of eight characters. We content analyzed portrayals of these characters to determine their levels of aggression. Results suggested viewer aggression predicted identification with aggressive characters, but did not predict homophily and parasocial interaction beyond the variance explained by gender. We also observed relationships among the dependent variables and differences between physical and verbal aggression.

Since the early days of television, people have been concerned about the possible negative effects of television on violent or aggressive behavior. One research direction to studying these effects has been to explore people's perceptions of the characters they encounter on the programs they watch. Perceived homophily, identification, and parasocial relationships with these characters are important because they may "mediate short- and long-term emotional reactions to depicted events and to characters themselves" (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991, p. 64). Connections between these relationships and trait aggression, which might help explain viewer aggression, have not yet been tested. We sought to account for these relationships with aggressive characters as they are linked to one's level of trait aggression.

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Researchers have found that the effects of encountering violent television content are not uniform, but are based on viewer characteristics (e.g., Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee, 1972). Among these characteristics is a disposition to behave aggressively. Aggressive dispositions are trait characteristics that develop over time and are stable across situations and time (Botha & Mels, 1990; Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1984). Huesmann and Eron (1986) noted that these tendencies predict serious adult antisocial behavior. Situational factors, such as familial and environmental background and observational learning conditions, interact with such aggressive tendencies to influence the probability of an aggressive response. In general, researchers have found support for the view that more aggressive people are influenced by exposure to media violence (e.g., Dorr & Kovaric, 1980).

Whereas people who are not aggressive in nature also may be influenced by media violence, the nature and extent of the effects are likely to be different from the effects on more aggressive viewers. For example, media violence may teach nonaggressive viewers aggressive attitudes, but it is likely to do this and more (e.g., reinforce existing aggressive attitudes) for aggressive persons. Violent media portrayals also might have nonaggressive outcomes, such as bringing about prosocial behaviors (Evans, 1989). Here, however, we were interested in aggressive outcomes because they are more problematic for promoting antisocial attitudes and behaviors, which are more likely to exist in aggressive individuals. We assessed viewers' self-reported aggression and their homophily, identification, and parasocial relationships with aggressive characters, which should mediate the content-effect relationship.

Some evidence for the importance of people's aggressive dispositions is provided by researchers who have noted that aggressive tendencies influence viewing preferences (e.g., Gunter, 1983, 1985). Gunter found that people with aggressive dispositions enjoy watching violent content, perceive violence in shows to be more humorous and exciting, and are more tolerant of others' violence than less aggressive people. Others have observed similar results about the influence of aggression on program preferences for children (e.g., Atkin, Greenberg, Korzenny, & McDermott, 1979; Cantor & Nathanson, 1997; Eron, 1963), for adolescents, and for adults (e.g., Diener & Defour, 1978; Heller & Polsky, 1976; Robinson & Bachman, 1972). Selective exposure provides one explanation of this effect (e.g., Zillmann & Bryant, 1985).

According to the selective exposure hypothesis, people selectively choose what they will be exposed to in the media. Although most studies have not focused on aggressive content, it is likely that selectivity influences the choice of such content, in that people prefer supportive rather than discrepant messages to validate their thoughts, feelings, or actions (Atkin et al., 1979). Social cognitive theory helps explain this selectivity in exposure to television content and the impact of viewing such content.

Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory was formulated on the basis of social learning theory, which is interested in observational learning and imitation as they apply to social behavior, and had an early focus on aggressive behavior. Bandura (1978) stated that a theory of human aggression should explain (a) how aggressive patterns are formed, (b) what provokes people to behave aggressively, and (c) what sustains aggressive behavior. Bandura (1977) noted there is an interaction of personal, behavioral, and environmental determinants in acquiring aggressive tendencies.

Social learning theory was based on several assumptions (e.g., Bandura, 1978; Evans, 1989). First, as a phenomenon, aggression must be learned. Second, learning aggressive actions happens vicariously through observing a model (Bandura, 1977). Third, the electronic media play an important role in the social diffusion of aggressive ideas and behavior, making symbolic modeling a key component in the social diffusion of ideas, values, and behaviors (Boeree, 2001).

Following early empirical work, cognitive components were added to the theory to explain null findings that not every child imitates aggression. Social cognitive theory sought to explain such findings for which social learning theory could not account, such as identification with television characters. Cognitive factors were assumed partially to determine which environmental events are observed, what meaning is attributed to them, whether they have lasting effects, what emotional impact and motivating power they have, and how information conveyed is organized for future use (Bandura, 2001).

Bandura (2001) outlined several cognitive capacities thought to be crucial for learning, including symbolizing, self-efficacy, self-regulation, self-reflection, and forethought. For example, if we foresee negative outcomes to our actions, we will be less likely to pursue them. In addition, the ability to participate vicariously in another's experiences, at times to the point of identity loss, is an important cognitive function with implications for a character's influence on viewers. Related to this is the ability to engage in abstract modeling (Bandura, 2001). That is, observers not only learn how to act but to extract rules governing a specific judgment or action exhibited by others. They can then use these rules to generate new instances of aggressive attitudes and behavior that go beyond what they have viewed or heard.

Social cognitive theory takes into account many factors that moderate or mediate the relationship between viewing aggression and acquiring and imitating aggressive cues. Personal characteristics of both the viewer and model are crucial to the process. Thus, factors such as perceptions of characters are important as they affect the relationship between viewing and acquiring or performing aggression. These factors help determine whether one is more likely to learn aggression from and imitate television characters. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the conditions and processes that facilitate such learning and imitation.

Many factors, including attractiveness and gender, are important to the relation-

ships viewers form with television characters (Bandura, 1994). Here, we focused on the viewer's inclination to be aggressive and the character's aggression, as they influence perception of that character. Social cognitive theory should take relational factors such as similarity, identification, and empathy with characters into account. Some have suggested that identification, as a cognitive factor, plays a crucial role in linking people's perceptions of others and the outcomes of these perceptions. Bjorkqvist (1997), for example, found that an adolescent's identification with a parental role model was important in bringing about imitation.

Homophily, Identification, and Parasocial Relationships With Television Characters

Rogers and Bhowmik (1970/1971) argued that a fundamental principle of human communication is, "the exchange of messages most frequently occurs between a source and a receiver who are alike, similar, and homophilous" (p. 526). *Homophily* is the degree to which people who interact are similar in beliefs, education, social status, and the like. It can be objective or subjective. It is subjective when it concerns our perception of how similar we are to a target person. Homophily also can be a communication antecedent or outcome. As Prisbell and Andersen (1980) wrote, "regardless of causation, increases of perceived homophily are associated with increases in the frequency of interactions" (p. 23).

Research has supported the importance of attitude and behavior homophily in interpersonal (e.g., Byrne, 1961; Kendall & Yum, 1984; Prisbell & Andersen, 1980) and mass-mediated relationships. Hoffner and Cantor (1991) argued, "similar characters have the potential to confirm the validity of the viewer's own beliefs and concerns" (p. 85). Similarly, Hutchinson (1982) noted that homophily can predict a person's exposure to media information. Social cognitive theory also accounts for homophily, suggesting that people are more likely to pay attention to and be influenced by models who are perceived to be similar (Bandura, 1994).

Greater degrees of homophily also have been linked to more identification with a television character. *Identification* refers to a viewer sharing a character's perspective and vicariously participating in the character's experiences when viewing (Hoffner, 1996). This identification is thought to increase the influence of televised content, as it is sometimes extended to the desire to be like or to behave like the character. Researchers have demonstrated the importance of identification, and especially identification based on gender, in mediating television's effects on younger viewers (e.g., Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961; Dorr, 1981; Huesmann, Lagerspetz, & Eron, 1984; MacCoby & Wilson, 1957; Reeves & Miller, 1978).

Such effects also have been observed for adults. Turner and Berkowitz (1972), for example, found identification with a film's aggressor produced hostility toward the experimenter and experiment. Tannenbaum and Gaer (1965) noted, "identification with the protagonist is a mechanism through which vicarious emotional experiences

are accomplished" (p. 616). In their study of *All in the Family*, Bringham and Giesbrecht (1976) found liking and identifying with main characters "strongly related to racial attitudes" (p. 73). However, liking or agreeing with Archie Bunker did not predict liking the program. Such findings emphasize the importance of the relationship a viewer forms with a character in influencing potential viewing effects.

Nordlund (1978) noted that television has high media interaction potential as a result of its recurring characters. *Parasocial interaction* (PSI) reflects media interaction and is a "seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). It is a relationship of friendship with a media personality based on felt affective ties with that persona (Horton & Wohl, 1956; R. B. Rubin & Rubin, 2001). It may be experienced as "seeking guidance from a media persona, seeing media personalities as friends, [and] imagining being part of a favorite program's social world" (A. M. Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985, pp. 156-157). As we view a program, we become familiar with the persona by observing and interpreting the appearance, attitude, style, and behavior of the performer.

Horton and Wohl (1956) compared the parasocial relationship to an interpersonal relationship, as connections develop over time and are based on similarity and uncertainty reduction. Increased viewing and felt disclosure may lead to a deeper perceived intimacy with, liking of, and reliance on the character. PSI influences exposure to televised content and mediates effects (e.g., Conway & Rubin, 1991; Levy, 1979; A. M. Rubin & Perse, 1987; A. M. Rubin et al., 1985).

These three relationships—homophily, identification, and parasocial interaction—enjoy similarities and differences. Parasocial interaction has been linked to attitude similarity, attraction, and identification with the persona (e.g., Anderson & de Mancillas, 1978; R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Turner, 1993). PSI, though, has an interactional component lacking in identification (Cohen, 2001). Audience members respond to the character as if they had met him/her on the street, but retain their own personalities. PSI, then, has no identity loss (Noble, 1975). It also continues beyond the viewing experience. Identification is thought to be more escapist and temporary, taking place while viewing (Rosengren & Windahl, 1972), as the viewer vicariously adopts the perspective of the character, rather than projecting the viewer's own perspective on the situation (Cohen, 2001). Surrendering one's own identity and vicariously experiencing others' realities are key aspects of social cognitive theory.

Cohen (2001) suggested that empathy and understanding of the character are the bases of identification and that attraction is the foundation of PSI. Others, though, have argued that PSI is grounded in attraction, perceived similarity, and empathy (A. M. Rubin et al., 1985; R. B. Rubin & Rubin, 2001). Homophily also is based on similarity, but not necessarily on attraction; the similarity comparison, though, is less obvious in identification (Cohen, 2001). Also, some have suggested that identification and PSI can take place at the same time (Noble, 1975; Rosengren & Windahl, 1972). Consequently, these relational processes may be related.

Gender

Researchers have identified differences between men and women regarding media behavior and effects, especially violence and aggression (e.g., Lemish, 1998). Cantor and Nathanson (1997), for example, found men to be more attracted than women to violence on television, especially in justice-restoring shows. Others observed differences in the motives of men and women for watching and enjoying violent television shows, especially sports (e.g., Bryant, Comisky, & Zillmann, 1981; Gantz & Wenner, 1991). Investigators also reported differences between men and women as to their perceived relationships with television characters (e.g., Bandura et al., 1961; Maccoby & Wilson, 1957). Reeves and Miller (1978), for example, found boys to identify more than girls with television characters, and explained this likely results from more boy, rather than girl, characters on television.

Given these differences, and because men and women generally differ in their levels of aggression (e.g., J. A. Harris, 1997; M. B. Harris & Knight-Bohnhoff, 1996; Perry, Perry, & Rasmussen, 1986), we controlled for gender when examining links between viewers' aggression and relationships with television characters. Our own interest, though, was on dispositional aggression.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

In this study, then, we employed a social cognitive framework to examine the links between aggressive dispositions and viewers' perceived relationships with television personae. Based on the earlier research, and controlling for gender, we expected aggressive dispositions to help explain identification, homophily, and parasocial relationships with aggressive personalites.

> H1: Higher levels of viewer aggression will predict greater identification, greater perceived homophily, and greater parasocial interaction with aggressive television characters or personalities.

We also expected perceived similarity to help explain identification with aggressive television personae.

> H2: Greater perceived homophily with aggressive television characters or personalities will predict greater identification with those aggressive personae.

Parasocial interaction, perceived homophily, and identification are theoretically distinct constructs. Yet, as noted earlier, there is only limited empirical support for their orthogonal nature. We were interested in considering how links among the relationship constructs might affect their association with viewer aggression. Specifically, we sought to examine whether PSI moderates the relationship between identification and aggression.

We examined this for two reasons. First, parasocial interaction has been suggested

to be an external evaluation of a character, whereas identification is a vicarious experience in which the viewer assumes the role of the character. Second, identification should be more temporary than parasocial interaction, limited to the fleeting viewing experience (e.g., Cohen, 2001). Although it is possible to identify with a character without forming a parasocial relationship, engaging in PSI might enhance the identification experienced with the character. So, PSI might be a moderator variable, which "affects the direction and/or strength of the relation between an independent or predictor variable and a dependent or criterion variable" (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p. 1174). There is, however, insufficient empirical evidence for this notion, and it is possible that PSI and identification occur simultaneously (e.g., Rosengren & Windahl, 1972). Therefore, we asked:

RQ1: Will parasocial interaction with aggressive television characters moderate the relationship between viewer aggression and identification with those characters?

Potter (1997) noted that the issue of defining violence is unresolved. Operationalizations are varied and it is not clear if the definitions should include verbal as well as physical violence. Potter stated that this issue concerns potential harm. Researchers agree that mediated physical violence poses a risk of negative effects on viewers, but would verbal violence also be harmful? For example, a viewer might become disinhibited after watching forms of violence and this might lead to being more physically aggressive.

Potter (1999) also argued that using a broad definition of violence, including verbal violence, is important because it gives researchers a fuller picture of the television landscape and enables them to make more accurate assessments of risks posed to viewers by mediated content. He also noted that results reported in studies do "not make it possible to draw conclusions about the relative contributions of different kinds of violence on viewers' disinhibitions" (p. 231).

We also sought to examine the differential association of verbal and physical aggression with the various relationships with television characters. Although not extending this to the impact of various forms of aggression on disinhibition and actual behavior, we believe that considering the connection between these forms of aggression and the relationships with aggressive television characters is an important step in learning about the mechanisms through which these effects might occur.

Researchers have observed a distinction between physical and verbal aggression (e.g., Bandura et al., 1961). Buss and Perry (1992), however, noted that both verbal and physical aggression represent the instrumental aspect of aggressive behavior, suggesting fewer differences between the dimensions. It is difficult, then, to estimate what the differences might be between physical and verbal aggression in connection to the various relationships with television personalities. Therefore, we asked:

RQ2: Will verbal aggression and physical aggression differ in predicting homophily, identification, and parasocial relationships with aggressive television characters or personalities?

Methods

We used a content analysis of television characters and surveys of participants to assess preferred aggressive characters or personalities and viewers' levels of aggression, homophily, identification, and parasocial interaction.

Sample and Procedures

Sample. Because aggressiveness is a trait that is consistent in various aspects of one's life, there was no reason to believe that college students would vary significantly from other segments of the population in this respect. Television use, though, does vary throughout one's life and it is unlikely that all segments of the population will be similar in their viewing patterns (e.g., Hollenbeck, 1978; A. M. Rubin & Rubin, 1982). Researchers have found college students to be intentional in their viewing (e.g., Carveth & Alexander, 1985; Lemish, 1985). Further, many of the parasocial interaction, identification, and homophily studies have focused on college students, permitting a comparison of results using similar populations. Our sample consisted of 219 undergraduates at a large midwestern university; 52.5% were women. Ages ranged from 18 to 42, with an average of 20.16 years (SD = 3.01).

Television personalities. We asked participants to complete several instruments to assess their relationships with an aggressive television character/personality and their own levels of trait aggression. Before doing so, we provided participants with a list of eight aggressive television characters/personalities. We chose all characters/personalities from popular broadcast, cable, or syndicated shows (TV news & ratings, 2000). We selected the personalities because of the potential for repeated exposure that enables continuous relationships, they were familiar to participants, and we considered them to be verbally or physically aggressive. We content analyzed the eight characters to confirm their aggressiveness.

We asked participants to indicate the characters/personalities they recognized on that list. If they did not recognize any characters we listed, they had a choice of completing an alternative questionnaire. No participant chose that option. We then asked them to complete the homophily, identification, and parasocial interaction instruments about one of the characters/personalities they recognized. We asked them to complete all instruments for the same television persona. No further instructions were given. Of the sample, 28.8% completed the questionnaire about Al Bundy of *Married . . . with Children*, 27.9% chose The Rock of *WWF Wrestling*, 18.7% chose Mimi Bobeck of *The Drew Carey Show*, 13.2% chose Buffy Summers of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 5.9% chose Andy Sipowicz of *NYPD Blue*, 2.3% chose Cordell Walker of *Walker, Texas Ranger*, 1.8% chose Xena of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, and 1.4% selected Hulk Hogan of *WWC Wrestling*.

Validity check. To validate the choice of selected characters/personalities as the

stimulus for the relationship measures, we asked participants to answer four questions *after* they had completed all relationship measures: "How aggressive do you think this character or personality is?" ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.11$); "How often do you watch the character or personality on television?" ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.90$); "How much do you agree with the following statement: "Of all the characters or personalities I watch on television, this is my favorite one?" ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.13$); and "How much do you agree with the following statement: "I like this character or personality?" ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.96$). Responses were coded so that a 1 represented a low-end and a 5 a high-end response. The responses suggested that the participants watched these characters on television, liked the characters, and felt the characters were aggressive.

Participants initially completed the several relationships measures about the selected persona. Later in the questionnaire, they completed the aggression instrument about themselves.

Measurement Scales

Homophily. We used the measure of perceived homophily with public figures developed by Andersen and de Mancillas (1978), which was appropriate for examining television personalities. The scale contains six items measuring attitude homophily and four items measuring background homophily. We adapted the scale and deleted one item so that it reflected generalized perceived homophily. Items included, for example, "the character shares my beliefs," "the character's goals are the same as mine," and "the character's background is similar to mine."

Response options ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). We reverse coded negatively phrased items, and averaged responses for each dimension. The means were 2.30 ($SD = 0.80$) for the attitude dimension and 2.09 ($SD = 0.88$) for the background dimension. The mean for the entire scale was 2.23 ($SD = 0.75$). A principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization suggested a bidimensional measure of homophily that was dissimilar to the two dimensions found in past research. The second factor, though, contained only the two negatively worded items. Therefore, we used the scale as a whole. After deleting three items to increase the scale's reliability, the Cronbach alpha was .82 for the entire scale.

Identification. Because there is no one measure of identification with established validity and reliability, we constructed a scale to tap the construct. The identification scale was composed mainly of questions from Rosengren, Windahl, Hakansson, and Johnsson-Smaragdi (1976) and from Hoffner (1996). We adapted the items to make them appropriate for relationships with specific characters rather than programs. We added five items that represented qualities of identification noted in the literature (i.e., transient and fantasy vicarious participation of the viewer in the experiences of the character when viewing). We also pretested the scale with 495 undergraduates; the pretest Cronbach alpha was .90.

The response options for the measure ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Items included, for example, "I wish I could be more like the character," "I'd like to do the kinds of things the character or personality does on the program," and "when I watch the character on the program, I imagine myself in his/her place." We averaged responses to indicate the level of wishful identification. The mean score for the 15-item scale was 2.16 (SD = 0.75), with a .93 Cronbach alpha. The scale was used as a unidimensional measure of identification.

Parasocial interaction. We used the 20-item Parasocial Interaction Scale (A. M. Rubin, 1994; A. M. Rubin et al., 1985) to assess PSI. Response options ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Items included, for example, "the character makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends," "I see the character as a natural, down-to-earth person," and "I look forward to watching the character on the program." We averaged responses to create the PSI measure. The scale had a mean score of 2.88 (SD = 0.59) and a .86 Cronbach alpha.

Aggression. Following the relationship measures and the validity check, we used the Aggression Questionnaire to assess participants' levels of trait aggression (Buss & Perry, 1992). Response options ranged from *extremely uncharacteristic of me* (1) to *extremely characteristic of me* (5). Items included, for example, "if somebody hits me, I hit back," "if I have to resort to violence to protect my rights, I will," and "there are people who pushed me so far that we came to blows." We reverse coded nonaggressive items. Researchers have used the scale in its entirety and the separate subscales. We used the *physical aggression* and *verbal aggression* subscales. According to Buss and Perry (1992), these 14 items represent the motor or instrumental aspect of behavior. We chose these two subscales because they included the same, comparable indices we used to code the aggression levels of the television characters/personalities.

We averaged responses to the respective items to determine subscale scores. The mean for the verbal aggression items was 3.09 (SD = 0.75) and the mean for the physical aggression items was 2.49 (SD = 0.84). The total aggression score was the average across both subscales (M = 2.70, SD = 0.66). The Cronbach alphas were .72 for the verbal aggression subscale, .85 for the physical aggression subscale, and .83 for the entire aggression scale.

Data Analysis

We examined the hypotheses by using hierarchical regression. We entered gender on the first step of the regressions as a control variable. We ran diagnostics statistics on all regression models and found the VIF values of the independent variables were below 10 (i.e., ranging from 0.91 to 1.10). This indicates no problematic associations among the variables that might influence the coefficient estimates. We used partial correlations to examine RQ1. For RQ2 we correlated participants' levels of aggression with those of the television personalities, which we classified according to the content analysis results. Because some characters were chosen by only a few people

in the sample, we could not analyze the data for each character separately. We also used partial correlations and *t*-tests to examine gender.

Content Analysis

Although it has statistical limitations, we used a nonprobability sample of selected programs to content analyze. We sampled four episodes of each 30-minute program and two episodes of each 60-minute program for the eight characters/personalities. We had two coders, who were graduate students from another department, code the characters' aggression levels. We provided the coders with instructions as to when an act should be coded as being aggressive. Every aggressive act was coded in the same manner. Classifying a character by his or her level of aggression was done by summing the total number of aggressive acts committed by that character. General background information about the character or personality also was coded.

We used the National Television Violence Study (NTVS) (1994/1995) to define aggression and aggressive acts. *Aggression* is the motivation behind acting violently and so it can be inferred from violent acts (Huesmann & Miller, 1994). Thus, a character/personality who was coded as violent also was considered more aggressive than a less violent character. We used the definitions provided by the NTVS for the following terms: violence, intentionality, physical force, physical harm, credible threat, accidents, and physical force against property.

We added another category not in the NTVS, *verbal aggression*, which refers to attacking the self-concept of a person instead of, or in addition to, his or her position on certain topics (Wigley, 1986). Because we measured this dimension as part of the Aggression Questionnaire, it also was important to code the verbal aggression of the television characters. Verbally aggressive messages were those intended to harm a person psychologically, including character attacks, competence attacks, insults,

Table 1
Content Analysis of Aggressive Characters

Character	Verbal Aggression	Physical Aggression	Total Aggression
Xena (*Xena: Warrior Princess*)	16	105	121
Hulk Hogan (*WWC Wrestling*)	6	93	99
The Rock (*WWF Wrestling*)	6	87	93
Buffy Summers (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*)	4	59	63
Al Bundy (*Married with Children*)	46	3	49
Cordell Walker (*Walker, Texas Ranger*)	0	35	35
Andy Sipowicz (*NYPD Blue*)	11	15	26
Mimi Bobeck (*The Drew Carey Show*)	21	2	23

teasing, ridicule, and nonverbal emblems (e.g., faces or gestures that were insulting or belittling to another). Table 1 summarizes the results of the content analysis.

We assessed intercoder reliability across a subsample of two 60-minute programs and two 30-minute programs. Each coder coded all 18 shows and one of the researchers resolved any disagreement between the coders. In coding the sample, coders indicated any violent act or verbal comment made by the aggressive characters. We decided to allow the coders to indicate any act of violence throughout the show rather than predetermining that they must code the show in particular segments (e.g., 30-second segments) or by scenes. In this way, the coders were not restricted in their noting of violence. As a result of this conceptual decision, it was impossible for us to determine the percentage of expected agreement between the coders. Thus, we could not account for chance in the estimation of the intercoder reliability.

Rather, the percentage of agreement we used as an indicator of intercoder reliability is similar to the agreement on unitizing used by some researchers in content analyses of sex and violence on television (Kunkel et al., 1999; Wilson et al., 1997). Kunkel et al. defined *unitizing* as the process of identifying any *scene* that contains the specific content coded. In assessing reliability, the coders must identify (a) the same number of scenes and (b) the same scenes from the show. Our unit of analysis was the *act* rather than the scene. Although using considerably fewer coders than those used to code the large data sets in the previous studies, we followed the logic of Wilson et al. and Kunkel et al. Thus, coders needed to agree on both the number of acts and the acts themselves, in order to reach perfect agreement. Our study's intercoder reliability coefficient represents this notion of perfect agreement between coders on the acts of violence in the shows (i.e., agreement on the number of acts and the specific acts). The intercoder reliability of .86 was assessed by computing the percentage of agreement between the two coders across all programs and coding decisions.

Results

Initially, we correlated participants' levels of aggression with the three relationship variables. Viewer aggression correlated modestly but significantly with all three relationships with an aggressive television character: identification ($r = .26$, $p < .001$); homophily ($r = .18$, $p < .01$); and parasocial interaction ($r = .15$, $p < .05$).

We did several analyses of gender to examine whether there were differences between men and women as to their relationships with aggressive characters. We found significant differences in the choice of characters based on the gender of the viewer and the character, $\chi^2(1, N = 217) = 14.16$, $p < .001$, $C = .25$. Men tended to choose male characters ($n = 81$) rather than female characters ($n = 22$); 62 women chose male characters and 52 chose female characters. We also compared the sexes on responses to the four validity check questions. Men viewed the

Table 2
Comparing Means for Men and Women on Predictor, Outcome, and Validity Measures

	Men	Women	t	$p <$
Predictor Measures				
Total Aggression	40.84	34.93	4.98	.001
Physical Aggression	25.14	19.69	5.73	.001
Verbal Aggression	15.70	15.24	0.90	.37
Outcome Measures				
Parasocial Interaction	3.00	2.77	2.89	.01
Identification	2.42	1.91	5.39	.001
Homophily	2.40	2.06	3.40	.01
Attitude Homophily	2.47	2.12	3.20	.01
Background Homophily	2.25	1.92	2.79	.01
Validity Measures				
Frequency of Viewing	3.39	3.11	2.27	.05
Liking of Character	3.75	3.50	1.94	.06
Favorite Character	3.09	2.39	4.79	.001
Perception of Character Aggression	3.81	4.02	−1.40	.17

characters they chose significantly more often than did the women. Further, men considered the characters they chose to be one of their favorite characters or personalities on television more than did the women in the sample. The two groups did not significantly differ in their liking of the characters and in their perceptions of the characters' aggression.

We repeated the statistical analyses for each gender separately. When comparing the means of the two groups, we found significant differences between men and women on most predictor and relationship variables (i.e., total and physical aggression, identification, homophily, PSI with aggressive characters), except verbal aggression. Table 2 summarizes the results. In addition, when controlling for viewers' gender, we found only the correlations among total, physical, and verbal aggression, and among identification and both total and physical viewer aggression, were significant. We used gender as a control variable when examining the hypotheses.

We also examined the associations among the dependent measures and found them to correlate with one another: homophily and identification ($r = .68$, $p < .001$); homophily and PSI ($r = .58$, $p < .001$); and PSI and identification ($r = .66$, $p < .001$). Because the correlations were below .80, these associations should not influence the coefficient estimates in the regression models in a problematic manner (Kennedy, 1984).

Hypotheses

The first hypothesis expected that, when controlling for viewers' gender, higher levels of viewer aggression will predict greater identification, perceived homophily, and parasocial interaction with aggressive television characters/personalities. H1 was partially supported (see Table 3). Using hierarchical regression analysis, with gender entered on step one, we found that overall viewer aggression significantly predicted identification with aggressive television characters on step two ($\beta = .17$, $p < .05$) beyond the variance explained by gender ($\Delta R^2 = .03$). In contrast, viewer aggression did not significantly predict homophily or parasocial interaction with aggressive television characters beyond the variance explained by gender.

The second hypothesis stated that, when controlling for gender, greater perceived homophily with television personalities will predict greater identification with aggressive personae. This hypothesis was supported (see Table 4). When entering homophily on step two following gender on step one, homophily significantly predicted identification with characters ($\beta = .64$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = .39$).

Research Questions

The first research question asked whether parasocial interaction with aggressive characters moderated the relationship between viewer aggression and identification with these characters. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), "within a correlational analysis framework, a moderator is a third variable that affects the zero-order correlation between two other variables" (p. 1174). Therefore, we assessed the correlation between viewer aggression and identification ($r = .25$, $p < .001$), controlling for PSI ($r = .22$, $p < .001$) and for both PSI and gender ($r = .14$, $p < .05$). Both PSI and gender did moderate the relationship between viewer aggression and

Table 3
Regressing Viewer Aggression and Gender on Identification, Homophily, and Parasocial Interaction With Aggressive Television Characters

	Identification		Homophily		PSI	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
Step 1: Gender	−.33	−5.10***	−.22	−3.28***	−.18	−2.63**
Step 2: Gender	−.28	−4.17***	−.19	−2.68**	−.15	−2.09*
Aggression	.17	2.48*	.11	1.51	.10	1.39

Note: Identification: Step 1: $R = .33$, $R^2 = .11$, $F(1, 215) = 25.98$, $p < .001$. Step 2: $R = .36$, $R^2 = .13$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(2, 214) = 16.37$, $p < .001$. Homophily: Step 1: $R = .22$, $R^2 = .05$, $F(1, 215) = 10.74$, $p = .001$. Step 2: $R = .24$, $R^2 = .06$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(2, 214) = 6.55$, $p < .01$. PSI: Step 1: $R = .18$, $R^2 = .03$, $F(1, 215) = 6.89$, $p < .01$. Step 2: $R = .20$, $R^2 = .04$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(2, 214) = 4.42$, $p < .05$
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 4
Regressing Identification on Homophily With Aggressive Television Characters

	Identification	
	β	t
Step 1: Gender	−.33	−5.10*
Step 2: Gender	−.19	−3.80*
Homophily	.64	12.75*

Note: Step 1: $R = .33$, $R^2 = .11$, $F(1, 215) = 25.98$, $p < .001$ Step 2: $R = .70$, $R^2 = .49$, $\Delta R^2 = .39$, $F(2, 214) = 104.07$, $p < .001$
*$p < .001$

identification with aggressive television characters, reducing the magnitude of the zero-order correlation.

The second research question asked whether there would be differences in the associations between the verbal and physical dimensions of aggression and the measured relationships with aggressive television personalities. We had asked the participants, "How aggressive do you think this character or personality is?" We found a significant positive correlation between participants' perceptions of the aggressiveness of characters and the results of the content analysis ($r = .28$, $p < .001$).

Physical aggression, but not verbal aggression, correlated positively with perceived aggression. Participants' perceptions of the physical aggressiveness of characters correlated positively with the physical aggression scores in the content analysis ($r = .48$, $p < .001$). But, participants' perceptions of the verbal aggressiveness of characters correlated negatively with the verbal aggression scores in the content analysis ($r = -.61$, $p < .001$). This suggests that participants did not perceive verbal aggression as aggressive behavior. Verbal and physical aggression scores of characters correlated highly, but negatively ($r = -.76$, $p < .001$).

In addition, the physical aggression of viewers correlated significantly with identification ($r = .26$, $p < .001$), homophily ($r = .16$, $p < .05$), and parasocial interaction ($r = .15$, $p < .05$) with aggressive characters, although the magnitude of relationships was not substantial. However, we found no significant associations between participants' verbal aggression and identification ($r = .13$, $p = .06$), homophily ($r = .10$, $p = .12$), or parasocial interaction ($r = .12$, $p = .07$).

Discussion

We sought to examine the relationships between viewers' aggressive dispositions and identification, homophily, and parasocial interaction with aggressive television characters or personalities. We found that aggressive dispositions predicted identification with aggressive personae beyond the variance explained by viewer gender.

This finding is consistent with past research (e.g., Bringham & Giesbrecht, 1976), some of which suggests that identification with aggressive personae affects viewers' subsequent antisocial behavior (e.g., Huesmann et al., 1984; Turner & Berkowitz, 1972). The finding raises potential concerns that already aggressive viewers who identify with aggressive characters may act more aggressively or have their aggressive attitudes or behaviors reinforced. Viewer aggression, though, did not predict homophily or PSI with aggressive personae beyond the variance explained by viewers' gender.

Despite the nonsignificant results for homophily and parasocial interaction, the significant positive link between aggression and identification with aggressive characters provides insight into the relationships viewers form with television characters. Participants who indicated that they viewed the characters or personalities more often tended to be more predisposed toward aggression and to engage more in identification with these personae than participants who viewed the personae less frequently. This suggests that the aggressive characters might reinforce the aggressive dispositions of the viewers.

In addition, as noted in social cognitive theory, participating vicariously in another's experiences, even to the point of surrendering one's own identity, is an important cognitive function with implications for how observing a character might influence a viewer. Based on abstract modeling, those who identify with aggressive personae may extract rules they learn from viewing to generate further aggressive attitudes and behaviors beyond what they actually viewed (Bandura, 2001). Future research should examine the cognitive components that moderate or mediate such modeling processes.

Relationships Among Identification, Homophily, and PSI

We found moderate associations among the three relationship variables: identification, homophily, and PSI with aggressive characters. This is consistent with research suggesting that greater identification is linked to greater perceived homophily (Dorr, 1981) and that PSI is linked to and might occur simultaneously with identification (Rosengren & Windahl, 1972). We also found that homophily with aggressive characters predicted identification with the characters beyond the variance explained by gender. Although we did not examine the effects of such relationships with characters on viewers, it is likely that such interrelationships create a fertile ground for more pronounced effects on viewers.

Another insight into these relationships is the moderation by parasocial interaction and gender of the expected link between viewers' aggression and identification with aggressive characters. This suggests that, although identification with television characters can occur independently, the relationship is enhanced when viewers parasocially interact with the characters. Not only does this finding suggest a mechanism through which identification occurs, but it also sheds light on the

complex relationship among the dependent variables in this study and provides empirical evidence for the theoretical uniqueness of PSI and identification.

One such distinction among the relationships is that identification was the only concept of the three that was predicted by viewers' own aggression beyond the variance explained by gender. What makes identification unique in this sense? This study does not provide a clear answer to this question and there is a need to examine the origins and implications of these differences further. Some possible explanations do exist, however, such as the notion that the viewer's position in relation to the text might influence the results. Cohen (2001) suggested that both PSI and homophily involve the viewer acting as an external observer to the text, whereas, in identification, the viewer is positioned inside the text, acting and reacting more as the character than as himself or herself. The possible unique state of awareness during identification might account for such differences.

It also is possible that these findings resulted from the investigation of the trait of aggression, which is mostly considered negative and antisocial and is not traditionally a trait people look for in their friends (parasocial interaction) or in themselves (homophily). Future research would benefit from further investigations of the three relationship concepts and from attempts to validate the theoretical differences among them empirically.

Related to this, there is a need to examine further the measure of identification, as it is possible that the correlation with the other concepts results from items tapping similar processes rather than highlighting conceptual differences. For example, the identification measure may be tapping dimensions such as identification during viewing and a more general identification that takes place after viewing. If this is the case, there is a need to establish clearer conceptual differences between identification and PSI.

Researchers, then, should focus on constructing a valid and reliable identification measure. The tendency to use a few questions to assess identification is problematic because it might ignore important aspects of the construct. The measure we used, which was based on items used in previous research, proved to be reliable. It would be useful to continue its development by examining its validity in relation to other constructs such as interpersonal attraction.

Although we did not examine the influence of aggressive characters on viewers, it is possible that those who identify with, perceive themselves to be similar to, and engage in PSI with aggressive characters are likely to be influenced, emotionally and cognitively, by these characters. This would especially be the case with those who identify with aggressive personae. When people perceive themselves to be similar to someone and identify with that person, whether in real life or in a vicarious mediated relationship, they usually feel more affinity with the other (Perse, 1990) and consider the relationship to be important. Thus, those who engage in these relationships, especially identification, are likely to be susceptible to a persona's influence and stronger effects are likely to take place. That is what A. M. Rubin and Step (2000) found for the impact of PSI with regard to the felt influence of talk-radio hosts. Such

outcomes are likely to be enhanced by the aggressive dispositions of active and instrumental viewers.

Verbal Versus Physical Aggression

When assessing our participants' perceptions of aggression, we found that verbal aggression was not considered to be on the same plane as physical aggression. That is, these participants tended to think of physical aggression, not verbal aggression, as *aggression*. This is consistent with research that has suggested verbal aggression to be a normative response in U.S. society (Wotring & Greenberg, 1973). Thus, physical aggression may carry more of a negative connotation than does verbal aggression. Further, we did not find verbal aggression to be significantly related to the relationship constructs in this study. This suggests that verbal aggression and physical aggression should be examined separately with regard to media effects. It also adds to our knowledge about the components of aggression, especially from the public's standpoint, and can advance researchers' attempts to define the concept of aggression.

Role of Gender

Gender is an important factor in communication relationships, including those with aggressive television characters. There were significant differences between men and women on most variables measured, and the analyses indicated that gender accounts for a large amount of the variance in the measured relationships. Men scored higher than women on all measures of the relationship with aggressive characters. Men also tended to view the aggressive characters more frequently than did women and to consider the character as one of their favorites.

These results support the notion that more frequent viewing of these aggressive characters was associated with stronger relationships with the characters. However, it is also possible that the results might be an artifact of the available choices of personae, which consisted of five male and three female characters. Future research would benefit from a closer examination of the role of gender in explaining relationships with aggressive and nonaggressive television characters.

Future Directions

Our findings suggest that aggressive viewers form relationships with aggressive television personae. Such relationships with television personae should moderate the link between television viewing and behaving aggressively. The next logical step is to consider the process of moderation and the consequences of these relationships. Specifically, when considering social cognitive theory, how do such relationships moderate or mediate the links between viewing and aggression? How much and what do aggressive viewers learn from the characters with whom they form rela-

tionships? What are the attitudinal and behavioral implications of the relationships formed with aggressive television characters? Because we asked participants to respond only about aggressive characters, we cannot generalize results to nonaggressive television personae. It would be interesting for future research to consider the relationships formed with nonaggressive characters, and to distinguish between fantasy characters and real-life personalities.

We provided participants with a list of predetermined characters. The character they chose was liked by the participants and frequently viewed by them. It is likely that participants chose to respond about a character with whom they identified, engaged in a parasocial relationship, or perceived similar to themselves. This might have minimized the variability in results and thus is a limitation of the study. Asking participants to respond about their favorite character or personality rather than providing them with a predetermined list might have yielded stronger results. Exposure to favorite characters or personalities is likely to be higher, as is perceived homophily, parasocial interaction, and identification. Favorite content and favorite characters tend to be more salient to people, and would probably produce more substantial relationships.

Further, we considered only aggressive characters in this study. As a result, we cannot rule out the idea that aggressive people also might form relationships with nonaggressive characters or that nonaggressive people might form relationships with nonaggressive characters as well. Our focus has been on aggressive characters in that salient relationships with aggressive characters might lead to antisocial attitudes and behaviors. Future research would benefit from examining a variety of characters and personalities, both aggressive and nonaggressive, as well as the *context* of aggression. We treated all aggressive acts similarly in the analyses. However, some have noted that it is important to consider the context of portrayals in assessing effects (e.g., Kunkel et al., 1995). Adding such dimensions as remorse, using aggression for self defense, and punishment and consequences of aggression, would be useful in future research.

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