

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS: EXAMINING VIEWERS'
CONNECTIONS WITH CHARACTERS
IN TELEVISION SERIES

by

Kaila Paloma Gray, B.S.

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Committee Members:

Michel M. Haigh, Chair

David S. Nolan

Cindy L. Royal

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to compare participants' parasocial relationships (PSRs) with characters in scripted television series and celebrities in reality television series and examine the role of gender in PSRs. It also evaluated the impact of binge-watching compared to watching on a weekly basis. Results indicate binge-watching strengthens PSRs between viewers and characters or celebrities in television series. In addition, viewers indicate stronger PSRs with characters in scripted television series compared to those with celebrities in reality television series. This study also found viewers are more likely to interact with scripted television series on social media. Moreover, males indicate stronger PSRs with their favorite characters or celebrities compared to females, and the gender of a viewer is positively correlated with the gender of their favorite character or celebrity. This study also indicates viewers who enjoy and appreciate a television series demonstrate stronger PSRs with its characters or celebrities.

I. INTRODUCTION

Audience members have numerous ways to view episodes of their favorite television series. Some viewers are watching episodes live, whereas others are watching later based on their schedules. On a daily basis, households watch more than seven hours and fifty minutes of television (Madrigal, 2018). The typical time spent watching live television is 22.5 hours per week (Statista, 2018). During an average week, four out of five viewers use smartphones, and over one third of viewers use Internet-connected devices, such as apps on smart television sets (Nielsen, 2018). The Nielsen Company (2018) states there are approximately 120 million television homes in the United States, and in 2017, 65 million homes owned an enabled device capable of streaming content to their television.

Due to the emergence of streaming video, viewers ages 18 to 49 watching prime-time television during premiere week decreased from 25.5 percent in 2016 to 8 percent in 2017 (Battaglio, 2017). Consequently, many viewers are watching multiple episodes in one sitting. In other words, they are binge-watching. Binge-watching is on the rise with the use of streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime Video, HBO Now, Showtime, Starz, DirecTV Now, PlayStation Vue, YouTube TV, and Sling TV, among others. Netflix found 73 percent of viewers define binge-watching as watching two to six episodes of the same series in one sitting (Friedman, 2017). Approximately three-fourths of Americans and 90 percent of millennials, or those born between 1981 and 1996, binge-watch. Almost 40 percent of those millennials binge-watch every week (Deloitte, 2016). Netflix provides entire seasons to be watched on viewers' own time, while other streaming services like Hulu release some television series' episodes on a weekly basis to

be viewed in the more traditional way (Friedman, 2017).

Whether viewers are accessing video content through an Internet connection, virtual satellite, or a cable provider, consumers are evolving in the way they watch video content. According to Nielsen (2018), the use of streaming devices, including smart televisions, video game consoles, and Internet-connected devices, increased from six to seven percent from 2016 to 2017. Approximately one quarter of Generation Z, those born after 1997, and millennial consumers had access to either one or two streaming devices, and access to all three forms of devices increased by 12 percent in both groups (Nielsen, 2018). While leaner television viewing represents most of audiences' time, two-thirds of viewers in the U.S. own at least one connected device (Tarpey, 2018). According to a CNBC survey, the percentage of U.S. consumers who use some sort of streaming service is 57 percent. Fifty-one percent of these streamers subscribe to Netflix, and 36 percent of them have both cable or satellite and at least one streaming service (Liesman, 2018).

Today's video viewing habits are both a "personal and mobile experience—anytime and anywhere" (Nielsen, 2018, para. 2). Binge-watching television series on video streaming services has continued to gain popularity. Due to the decline of people purchasing cable packages, DVDs, and Blu-rays, streaming is becoming widely used. Rather than viewing television series as they air on their respective networks, viewers are turning to these types of services for their media consumption (Nielsen, 2018). Streaming providers are creating their own content and producing entire seasons of series to be watched during a shorter amount of time, as opposed to viewing on a weekly basis. As it happens, 45 percent of Netflix users stream its original content (Nielsen, 2013).

As the number of streaming services is increasing, the content options available to

viewers is doing so as well. Unscripted or reality television programs such as contestant gameshows, comedy entertainment and audience-participation television series, are garnering enthusiasm. *The Bachelor*, *The Voice*, and *Survivor* ranked in *Complex's* top 20 most-watched shows (Gruttadaro, Reese, Barone, Aquino, Sheldon, Johnson, Hay, Bernucca, & Scarlett, 2018). The notion of watching real people living their everyday lives first emerged in the early 1970s with the release of PBS' *An American Family*, a television documentary following the life of the Louds. This later inspired MTV's *The Real World*, which was first broadcast in 1992. With this television series' success and others like CBS' *Survivor*, reality-based programs have continued to fill prime time viewing slots (Henry, 2011). While some audience members view these types of television series as a "guilty pleasure," Gates (2018) discusses how shows like *Love & Hip Hop* offer nuanced portrayals of women of color, mentioning, "That is the power of these shows, their ability to help us explore what it means to navigate life as people of color..." (para. 13). Viewers gain access to an alternate world, and even more so through reality stars' social media platforms (Gruttadaro et al., 2018).

Binge-watching is impacting audiences' connections with television series' characters. These connections are considered parasocial relationships (PSRs). Individuals commonly demonstrate feelings towards characters in all forms of media outlets such as books, movies, television, or radio (Cohen, 2009). Audience members engage in some form of mediated relationship. Fictional or non-fictional storylines can cause viewers to form emotional connections towards its characters. Individuals can engage in interactive and close experiences with these media characters. This can leave a short impression or a more permanent, long-lasting impression (Cohen, 2009). Previous research has indicated

individuals demonstrate strong PSRs towards media characters with whom they more familiar (Hall, 2017). PSRs are described as one-sided relationships in which an individual develops an attachment towards a character being portrayed through the media they are consuming. In other words, they are perceived intimate relationships (Bui, 2017).

Parasocial interaction (PSI) is a prevalent topic among media effects scholars. Consumers respond by perceiving a PSI as an intimate, reciprocal interaction (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016). Individuals form these types of relationships for distinct reasons. Some view it as a distraction from the real world and others as a form of enjoyment (Young, 2016). PSI is a viewer's response to media characters, also known as personae, during media consumption (Horton & Wohl, 1956). However, PSR is a more long-term response to these personae (Horton & Strauss, 1957). In other words, the audience becomes more invested in the media characters' narratives.

Researchers have shifted their focus from PSI to PSR to have a better understanding of viewers' connections with the media they are consuming (Cohen, 2009). PSRs are more predominant in research examining interactions viewers experience with media characters. PSR can also be referred to as an enduring, long-term, positive, one-sided relationship experienced by an individual with a media character (Dibble et al., 2016).

There is limited research examining PSR with characters in television series that are available to binge-watch because binge-watching is a newer phenomenon. It is important to investigate whether PSR is impacted by the way in which audience members are viewing series. Binge-watching may have a distinct impact on these forms of character connections compared to those when watching a series on a weekly basis on its

respective network.

This study examines the differences demonstrated in PSRs experienced by binge-watchers and non-binge-watchers with characters and celebrities. It also evaluates how PSRs differ when audience members identify with characters in a scripted series compared to celebrities in a reality television series, as well as the role gender plays in PSRs.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Parasocial Interactions (PSIs) and Parasocial Relationships (PSRs)

Parasocial interaction (PSI) is “a perceived interpersonal relationship on the part of a television viewer with a mass media persona” (Perse & Rubin, 1989, p. 1). It is primarily based on vicarious interaction as opposed to a real interaction. In other words, PSI is formed through continuous television viewing. Individuals feel as if they know and understand the characters as they do their own friends (Perse & Rubin, 1989). PSI is described as a media consumer’s response to a character or performer (Dibble et al., 2016). The individual becomes involved with a character in some way (Cohen, 2009). PSI is a media effect that can be predicted by media selectivity and motivation (Kim & Rubin, 1997).

A PSI occurs before a parasocial relationship (PSR) can be formed between a viewer and a media character. The path to PSR begins with social and task attraction, continues to PSI, and concludes with a sense of relationship importance (Perse & Rubin, 1989). When PSRs are formed, individuals begin to act similarly as they would in social relationships. For example, the traits viewers are attracted to in television characters are comparable to those that attract people in social relationships. Media content creators aim to increase PSR with characters because this leads to more loyal viewers (Cohen, 2009).

Individuals who form parasocial relationships (PSRs) believe characters are like their peers. Similar to social relationships, PSRs evolve over a certain amount of time (Perse & Rubin, 1989). A PSR is a strong emotional attachment with someone an individual has never met and who has no way of relating back, particularly with fictional characters. These types of relationships can evolve as individuals explore more

information about an actor and actress playing a specific character. This may include reading articles and watching interviews about the persona or browsing through their social media platforms (Young, 2016).

PSRs can also be referred to as “enduring, long-term, and usually positive, one-sided intimacy at a distance that users develop towards media performers, based on repeated encounters” (Dibble et al., 2016, p. 24). Although PSRs are not real relationships with media characters in television, radio, and film, viewers perceive them as such. This relationship is based on media characters appearing to self-disclose information with their audiences (Schiappa, Allen, & Gregg, 2007). PSRs generally occur between one individual, commonly a television viewer, and a media figure.

Identification

Individuals commonly demonstrate feelings towards characters in books, radio, movies, or television, and these emotions are aroused from fictional or non-fictional storylines. Individuals can engage in an interactive and close experience with these types of characters, which can, in turn, lead to a short impression or a more permanent, long-lasting impression (Cohen, 2009). While responses to characters may vary, they are all mediated relationships.

Viewers identify with characters like them, as well as those that face similar issues encountered in their everyday lives. The factors involved when children identify with a specific character include similarity in age, sex, and social class, and unison between a viewer’s motives and a character’s actions (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957). Maccoby and Wilson (1957) found similarity is less important to identification than role modeling because children identify more strongly with characters they strive to be like,

rather than those they are like. Children over the age of eight engage in wishful identification with characters who are older than them, which reflects what they would like to be, rather than who they are (Eyal & Rubin, 2003). Nonetheless, research has demonstrated children most often identify with characters who are children and are like them (Feilitzen & Linne, 1975). Physical similarities are less important when identifying with a character compared to homophily, which is the strongest predictor of character selection to form a PSR (Turner, 1993). There is a significant positive correlation between identification and homophily in attitudes, feelings, and background (Cohen & Perse, 2003).

PSR can be measured through identification, which is one of the most common forms of mediated relationships. It is characterized by a cognitive and emotional relationship between an individual and the character they are viewing. Audience members can exhibit a sense of sympathy or an affectionate bond with specific characters. Aertsen (2017) investigates the components of identification and sympathy through the cognitive film theory. Various films were analyzed for approval, admiration, compassion, attraction, homophily, and intimacy. Results demonstrated sympathy towards a character positively impacts and reflects the film's storyline, as well as how a character's qualities increase sympathy among its viewers.

Identification with characters in the media leads to interactions. Identification is a leading form of mediated relationship. There is a differentiation between identification and other forms of responses to media characters. For example, identification leads to interactions. When performing research regarding identification, the term capture is used,

which is how consumers interact and become involved with media content (Cohen, 2009).

History of Parasocial Interactions (PSIs) and Parasocial Relationships (PSRs)

Horton and Wohl (1956) refer to media performers as “personae,” which are the typical figures presented in the landscapes of radio or television (p. 216). Viewers perceive to know a persona in the same way they know their close friends. This is primarily through direct observation and interpretation of the persona’s appearance, gestures, and voice, as well as through the persona’s conversations and behavior in distinct situations. Personae provide continuous relationships with viewers because they are a reliable and reoccurring event that can be integrated into the routines of viewers’ daily lives. Furthermore, the viewer becomes a fan and comes to assume they know the persona on a more intimate level. There is an understanding and appreciation for the persona’s values and motives (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

One of the most predominant characteristics of the mass media; including radio, television, and movies, is the illusion of a face-to-face relationship with a performer. Horton and Wohl (1956) describe PSR as “a seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer” (p. 215). The theater is exemplified as an ambiguous meeting ground, in which real people perform fictional roles. In other words, this portrayal is only temporary because after a performance, the actor returns to the “matter-of-fact” world (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 216). On the other hand, radio and television exist in continuous interactions. These personalities exist solely in a parasocial form for their audiences.

Television networks and producers aim to find television personalities that attract

audiences. Their hope is that audiences will tune in and watch programming every week and form relationships with characters. Research regarding uses and gratifications has exhibited high affinity towards programming and its characters (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Viewers' relationships with characters closely resemble an interpersonal relationship. Rubin and McHugh (1987) explored how PSIs were developed. Participants were asked the length of time they had viewed their favorite television persona. Results indicate PSI was strongly associated with social and task attraction towards a character and relationship development with a character. The length of exposure to a media character was unrelated to PSI.

PSI is an apparent face-to-face interaction between media characters and audience members (Horton & Wohl, 1956). PSI has primarily been evaluated with a focus solely on the audience. Camera techniques can increase PSI. Audience members interpret camera angles and shot compositions similarly to how they react to interpersonal interactions with characters. For example, the tighter the shot, the closer the viewer feels towards a character, and PSI can increase when a viewer sees a character's background behavior (Meyrowitz, 1986).

There are three forms of interaction in television audience-participation programs, which are systems involving audiences and performers (Horton & Strauss, 1957). These forms are personal, vicarious, and parasocial. A personal interaction is described as "an immediate, face-to-face, and reciprocal mode of ordinary conversation" (Horton & Strauss, 1957, p. 579). A vicarious interaction is demonstrated through the audience's response to a theatrical drama. A PSI occurs when a viewer recognizes a personal relationship with the performer; however, the performer is engaging in a relationship with

an “anonymous collectivity” (Horton & Strauss, 1957, p. 579).

Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) developed a conceptual model designed to predict PSI from a social interaction need, including loneliness and television news use. When examining PSI, local television news provided important media content. In their study, they linked loneliness with less interpersonal communication and both loneliness and PSI with more television reliance. In addition, loneliness and PSI were not correlated. They found news viewing for information was closely related to stronger PSI and perceived news realism, which is an affective orientation that influences media use and behavior. Moreover, viewing news for excitement, affinity for local television news, and news viewing levels were positively correlated with this pattern as well. Rubin et al. (1985) concluded affinity for local television news, perceived news realism, and viewing news for information were predictors of PSI with television news personalities.

Turner (1993) examined the relationship of interpersonal homophily and self-esteem as it related to the development of PSI. He sought to understand whether an individual’s relationship with a media personality develops similarly to an actual interpersonal relationship. Homophily of attitude was the strongest predictor among the independent variables of PSI with all three groups of television performers, which included favorite television newscaster, favorite daytime television soap opera character, and favorite television performer. Moreover, results indicate certain dimensions of individuals’ self-esteem helped demonstrate PSI (Turner, 1993).

PSI is the principle explanation for the strong effects of soap operas on audience behavior. In their study, Shefner-Rogers, Rogers, and Singhal (1998) investigated PSI in popular soap operas. The series they selected to analyze was one broadcasted in Latin

America in the early 1970s and the other broadcasted in Japan in the later 1980s and early 1990s. PSI was developed with favorite characters from these series, specifically with those who entertained and educated their viewers. This is referred to as the entertainment-education approach. It is defined as the intentional incorporation of educational content in such messages as radio and television soap operas, popular music, film, street theater, and comic books. Shefner-Rogers et al. (1998) concluded while neither series were designed as entertainment-education soap operas, the approach contributed to the degree to which viewers were involved in PSI with characters. Moreover, viewers' perceptions of the characters were those of positive role-models for self-efficacy and other success values.

PSI involves audience members learning to recognize and interact with the images presented by media communicators, specifically entertainers, talk show hosts, personalities, and journalists (Levy, 1979). While viewers are not capable of directly communicating with the performers, they still interact with them. In other words, the audience members "benefit from the persona's wisdom, reflect on his advice, sympathize with him in his difficulties, and forgive his mistakes" (Levy, 1979, p. 70). Levy (1979) conducted focus group discussions relating to viewer attitudes towards television news programs and uses and gratification items. Results indicate PSI between audiences and news personalities shares attributes with both primary and secondary social relationships. A primary social relationship occurs within a small social group, during which individuals share a close and personal bond. During a secondary social relationship, individuals do not interact on such a personal level. In addition, he found PSRs are based on an affective bond that viewers create with the communicators. Although this relationship is subjective, viewers believe it is genuine and interpret it as a real bond

(Levy, 1979).

Perse and Rubin (1989) discussed PSI from the perspective of interpersonal attribution, focusing on the uncertainty reduction theory (URC) and the personal construct theory (PCT). Their primary focus was to have a better understanding of the early stages of PSR development. They examined 105 college students who viewed soap-operas. Viewers responses indicated PSRs with favorite characters were based on uncertainty reduction, as well as the ability to anticipate the emotions and attitudes of the character. Results suggested PSR development follows a certain path, which begins with social and task attraction, continues to PSI, and concludes with a sense of relationship importance (Perse & Rubin, 1989).

Tukachinsky (2010) explored the development and assessment of PSRs. She suggests PSR is a para-friendship and para-love because there is not a clear conceptualization or precise measurement of this form of relationship. After conducting three studies, Tukachinsky's (2010) results indicate a PSR is comprised of various types of relationships that mediate different media effects such as social relationships, friendships, and romantic relationships.

Schmid and Klimmt (2011) investigated PSRs with *Harry Potter* readers, specifically with participants in an individualistic culture and those in a collectivist culture. Readers completed an online survey measuring PSR components, including sociability, social attraction, homophily, and fandom. Results indicate readers in Mexico, a collectivist culture, ranked sociability higher than readers in Germany, an individualistic culture, did. Culture demonstrated social attraction as the most predominant motivator of PSR and homophily as the lowest (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011).

The causes, development, consequences, characteristics, and functions of PSI and PSR have been examined by previous researchers. Hu (2016) examined the influence of scandal on PSR, PSI, and parasocial breakup (PSB). A scandal involving an actor negatively influenced people's PSR with the character. The stronger the PSR with the character, the more PSB participants experienced after the scandal. PSI is positively related to PSR in the conditions of scandal and movie, scandal and talk show, and no scandal and talk show. In addition, PSI ranked higher with characters played by an actor in a film versus a guest on a talk show (Hu, 2016).

Previous research has primarily focused on PSRs with characters in scripted television series; therefore, it is important to examine such relationships with characters in reality series. These reality characters engage in breaking the fourth wall because they address the audience members directly, specifically in interviews. PSRs between viewers and media characters can be examined both while the television personality is on screen and on social media platforms as well.

Reality Television

Reality television has become one of the most prevalent genres in the last decade. Popular series include MTV's *Jersey Shore*, TLC's *Toddlers and Tiaras*, Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and A&E's *Duck Dynasty*, among others. Hernandez (2014) focuses on the Southern masculinity and manhood demonstrated in *Duck Dynasty*. Her analysis indicates the reality television series portrays a form of masculinity that includes characteristics of historical Southern masculinities, as well as reclaiming the term "redneck" to signify identity performance (Hernandez, 2014, p. 33).

Television is one of the primary storytellers in the modern environment. It can

help viewers establish a sense of what lies within and what lies outside the boundaries of cultural norms and behaviors. Scharrer and Blackburn (2018) examined the associations between overall amount of television viewing and viewing of reality programs featuring adults in romantic, friendship-oriented, or familial settings. Participants demonstrated how the exposure to documentary soap operas and the perception of reality can predict beliefs about aggression (Scharrer & Blackburn, 2018).

Scharrer and Blackburn (2018) found gender differences in the perceptions of physical and verbal aggression in response to conflict. Participants indicated it was more acceptable for females to engage in these forms of aggressions as opposed to men. However, male respondents tended to accept aggression as a normal aspect behavior more than females did. They concluded documentary soap opera viewing was a significant and positive predictor of approval of verbal aggression.

Parasocial Relationships (PSRs) in Reality Television

Reality television permits audiences to watch celebrities' everyday lives. Similar to soap operas, it appeals to viewers because they engage in an interaction with the television series' cast members. Henry (2011) explored PSRs with two types of reality stars. These stars were characterized as celebrity, which is someone who had fame before being on reality television and non-celebrity, who is someone who has fame because of the series. She compared levels of PSIs and how moral disengagement has the potential to play a role for each type of relationship with a reality star. She also examined whether PSRs are influenced by how often participants watch sub-genres of reality series, including dating or game series or documentary soap operas. Participants' PSRs and degree of moral disengagement with their favorite celebrity and non-celebrity on reality

series were influenced by the sub-genres of reality-based series (Henry, 2011).

Reality Television and Social Media Use

Haigh and Wigley (2015) evaluated social media use among fans during a time of crisis involving Paula Deen. The Food Network announced it would not renew Deen's contract in June 2013 after a leaked disposition in which Deen admitted to using the N-word when she was held at gunpoint by an African American man in 1986. Fans expressed their support on social media, particularly Facebook. Fans began posting on the Food Network Facebook page, as well as Deen's Facebook page, and they quickly started a "We Support Paula Deen" page that gained more than 500,000 followers. The lawsuit was dismissed; however, the Food Network did not reinstate Deen (Haigh & Wigley, 2015).

Haigh and Wigley (2015) analyzed Deen's Facebook page and the Food Network's Facebook page for PSI posts. The study assessed a form of breakup between fans and Deen by looking at fans' Facebook posts during a time of crisis. As fans' PSR was coming to end with Deen, they were experiencing a parasocial breakup (PCB), which mirrors a real-life breakup.

Haigh and Wigley (2015) found Deen's fans rarely commented about Deen or themselves growing up in the south, yet they were more likely to discuss her telling the truth and not lying while under oath. The most frequent way fans related *affectively* with Deen was by showing emotional support and offering forgiveness. Nearly a fifth of the posts discussed no longer watching the Food Network after Deen's termination, which demonstrates the behavioral element of PSI. The study demonstrated how fans' support did not, in fact, save Deen. Fans were able to make their voices heard because of social

media (Haigh & Wigley, 2015). This is just one example of the relationship fans form with an individual on a reality series.

In another example of fans supporting a reality star, Haigh (2015) examined fan comments on A&E's *Duck Dynasty* Facebook page after the series' patriarch, Phil Robertson, made statements regarding homosexual behavior and African Americans in an article in *GQ*. This, in turn, led to his suspension from the series in December 2013. Nine days after this announcement, A&E reported he would be returning.

Haigh (2015) coded fan comments on the series' Facebook page in December 2013 about Robertson's suspension and comments made after he could return to the television series. Specifically, the study looks at the "us" versus "them" theme among the Facebook posts. Posts were gathered from the first 24 hours after the suspension was announced, and additional posts were collected when Robertson was reinstated. They were analyzed for topics relating to support for Phil, Southern Christian values, and A&E.

The study evaluated fans' reactions to the suspension and whether they demonstrated support, as well as the development of PSRs with Robertson. Fans demonstrated their support for Robertson by discussing his First Amendment rights. Additionally, the most common way fans discussed Southern Christian masculinity was by mentioning Robertson's Christianity. Most posts discussed boycotting A&E until Robertson was reinstated. The topics of the posts changed before and after his reinstatement, revealing fans posted more when the suspension was announced (Haigh, 2015). Haigh (2015) states fans are likely to rally to support reality television celebrities in a crisis such as this one because they are motivated to post on social media, start

petitions, and boycott products or channels supporting the celebrity.

Hypotheses and Research Question

Ferchaud (2018) examined the effects of binge-watching and how it may alter the way in which audience members engage with a television series. This is a result of the amount of time between viewing episodes. She analyzed audience responses through transportation, identification, PSI, and enjoyment and appreciation. Binge-watching negatively impacted enjoyment and appreciation, as well as likelihood to recommend the series. When viewers binge-watch, they have less time to think about the series and build anticipation for the next episode. Results indicate those who watched on a weekly basis demonstrated increases in PSI (Ferchaud, 2018).

With today's new trend of binge-watching and the emerging use of streaming services, Wheeler (2015) investigated television viewing habits and binge-watching behaviors. Regarding the effects of binge-watching, she found binge-watching to be positively associated with television affinity, television viewing motives, and ritualistic television viewing, which contributes to the understanding of psychological correlates of television viewing behaviors. Ferchaud's (2018) study indicates binge-watching has a positive impact on the strength of PSR because those who watched on a weekly basis demonstrated increased PSI. However, her study did not examine binge-watching reality television series. Because reality television series feature real people, the relationship formed through binge-watching may be stronger. Therefore, to evaluate the impact of binge-watching on PSRs, this study poses the following:

H1: Viewers demonstrate stronger PSRs with characters and celebrities in television series they binge-watch compared to those they watch on a weekly

basis.

Auter and Davis (1991) examined viewers' reactions to characters speaking directly to the audience. This is described as breaking the invisible fourth wall, specifically in the realms of theater, such as in films or television programs. They demonstrate audiences do, in fact, enjoy being involved in the program. The clips shown to the subjects that broke the fourth wall ranked more entertaining and sophisticated. They concluded programs such as these are more cognitively involving. In a similar study, Auter (1992) examined how program content can influence viewers' ability or desire to connect with characters. His experiment altered breaking the fourth wall. He found PSI is related to program content, and students who viewed the high interaction version of the program episode indicated stronger PSI.

Viewers experience parasocial encounters when the illusion of being engaged in a social interaction occurs with a television performer. Viewers in Hartmann and Goldhoorn' (2011) study reported a more intense parasocial experience if they were verbally addressed by the television performer. In other words, when characters engaged in breaking the fourth wall, viewers experienced a stronger PSR. Additionally, parasocial experience ranked higher when the performer demonstrated strong perspective-talking ability (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011).

The technique of breaking the fourth wall takes place when a persona steps out of character to address the audience. Dibble et al. (2016) examined participants reactions to being either addressed by a character in a video or not being addressed at all. The study concluded PSI takes place during viewing, and PSR surpasses immediate viewing and gives the viewer a sense of involvement with the media character.

Based on past research indicating viewers' PSR is higher when addressed by a media character and Haigh and Wigley's (2015) findings that audience members are cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally tied to reality television personalities, those watching reality television series will likely indicate stronger PSRs. This may occur because celebrities are real people living their everyday lives, not actors in a scripted television series. This study poses the following:

H2: Participants in the reality television series group demonstrate stronger PSRs than those in the scripted television series group.

Reality television series allow viewers to follow the lives of reality characters during weekly episodes. Audience members can interact with these celebrities, specifically through social media platforms, blogs and websites, to learn more about them (Henry, 2011). Haigh and Wigley (2015) evaluated fans' social media use during a time of crisis. Fans took to social media to express their support for Paula Deen when the Food Network announced they would not renew her contract after a scandal. In response to experiencing a form of breakup, fans created a Facebook support page for Deen that gained over half a million followers (Haigh & Wigley, 2015). While the network did not reinstate her contract, fans were able to make their voices heard through social media, which further demonstrates the relationships viewers form with reality stars. Similarly, Haigh (2015) examined fans' comments on A&E's *Duck Dynasty* Facebook page after Phil Robertson, the series' patriarch, made inappropriate comments in a *GQ* article. She found fans displayed support by discussing his First Amendment rights, as well as his Christianity; therefore, fans are likely to rally and support reality personalities in times of crisis because they are motivated to post on social media (Haigh, 2015). Based on this

research demonstrating fans' support for celebrities in reality television series, this study poses the following:

H3: Viewers are more likely to interact with social media pages of reality television series and their celebrities compared to those of scripted television series and their actors.

Hall (2017) analyzed identification and PSRs with characters from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. Audience and character similarities can be evaluated on various dimensions. Gender, specifically, has previously been considered in this assessment. Previous research has indicated audiences tend to favor characters of their own gender over characters of a different gender (Hoffner, 1996). However, other research has found gender discrepancy between audiences and a character does not always lead to a decreased sense of connection (De Graaf & Hustinx, 2011). Participants were disproportionately likely to select characters of the same gender as the one with whom they felt the closest connection. When a viewer connected with a character that was featured prominently in a story, the lack of gender match did not decrease identification or PSR. Audience and characters similarities, such as personality, attitude, and circumstances, are potential contributors to character engagement, as opposed to demographics (Hall, 2017).

Newman (2018) evaluated how young girls engage in PSR with mediated characters. She sought to better understand how mothers attempt to restrict their daughters' PSRs with Disney princesses because of their concerns with healthy social development, positive role models, and social judgement. Results indicate while mothers were cautious of their daughters consuming too much of this media, they did not go to

extreme measures to prevent the development of PSR with one of the Disney princess characters. These findings suggest females are likely to engage in PSR with media characters at a young age.

In a similar study, Wang, Fink, and Cai (2008) examined how each gender responds to different types of loneliness. Their study investigates how loneliness affects mediated communication, specifically PSI. Viewers tend to experience unfulfilled interpersonal needs through social, chronic, situational, and transient loneliness. While these distinct types of loneliness predict various uses of PSI, gender serves as the moderator for these effects (Wang et al., 2008). They found greater family loneliness predicted stronger PSI for females; however, this displayed negative effects for males. Moreover, romantic loneliness was associated with less PSI for males, while it was slightly positive for females (Wang et al., 2008). In addition, previous research indicates female viewers tend to admire the attractiveness of media personae more than men do; therefore, females demonstrate stronger PSRs (Vorderer, 1996). Women also tend to form stronger PSIs with characters in soap operas (Turner, 1993).

These findings suggest females are likely to exhibit strong PSRs because when they experience certain types of loneliness they demonstrate increased PSI. Based on this research that demonstrates females form stronger PSRs than men do, this study poses the following:

H4: Females demonstrate stronger PSRs with characters and celebrities compared to men.

There is little research examining the type of character one relates to in television series. Regarding celebrities in reality television series, Haigh and Wigley (2015) did

notice fans supporting Deen and participants were of both genders. To further evaluate whether a participant's gender and a character or celebrity's gender influence PSR, this study poses the following:

RQ1: Is there a correlation between the gender of the participant and the gender of the character or celebrity they selected?

Narrative engagement occurs when audience members become involved in the narrative by losing awareness of the self and becoming immersed within the story (Ferchaud, 2018). The first component of narrative engagement is identification, in which viewers begin to internalize the thoughts, actions, and feelings of characters. Ferchaud (2018) states enjoyment and appreciation are ingrained in the content of media, and more specifically in narratives. Based on this research, this study poses the following:

H5: Viewers who score higher on the audience response scale demonstrate stronger PSRs with their favorite characters and celebrities.

III. METHODS

This study compared participants' PSRs with characters in scripted television series compared to those in reality television series, the role of gender in PSRs, as well as the impact of binge-watching compared to watching a television series on a weekly basis.

Scandal, *This Is Us*, and *The Walking Dead* were selected as the scripted television series. According to Nielsen (2018), *Scandal* and *This Is Us* ranked in the top ten list of prime broadcast network television. *The Walking Dead* ranked first in the top ten list of cable network television. *Scandal*, *This Is Us*, and *The Walking Dead* are available to stream on multiple video-on-demand (VOD) services. *Jersey Shore*, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, and *The Real Housewives of Orange County* were selected as the reality television series. *Jersey Shore* ranked fourth in the best reality television shows of all time (Gruttadaro et. al., 2018). *The Real Housewives* franchise and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* ranked in the *Insider's* top seventeen list of reality series on television (Nededog, 2017). *Jersey Shore*, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, and *The Real Housewives of Orange County* are available to stream on multiple VOD services.

Participants

Participants were 18 years of age or older ($N = 518$). They provided consent and then began the survey. Forty-five percent of participants were women, 54.1% were male, and 1.3% preferred not to say. Participants ranged from 18 to 80 years of age. The average age was 34.54. Approximately 76.6% were Caucasian, 9.2% were Black or African-American, 7.2% were Hispanic or Latino, 5.1% were Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1.8% failed to report ethnicity.

Seventeen percent had earned a high school diploma or GED, 14.7% had earned an associate's degree, 46.2% had earned a bachelor's degree, 13.8% had earned a master's degree, 3.3% had earned a professional degree, and 4% had earned a doctorate degree.

Procedures

After consenting to take part in the survey, participants were asked whether they have viewed one of the three scripted television series or one of three reality television series: *Scandal*, *This Is Us*, *The Walking Dead*, *Jersey Shore*, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, or *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. If a participant had not seen any of the series, they were directed out of the study.

An online survey was conducted using Amazon Mechanical Turk. A "hit" was created with a link to the online questionnaire and specific instructions. Only participants with a U.S.-based address, as registered through a Mechanical Turk profile, were eligible to participate. Participants earned \$1.00 for completing the questionnaire. The research team excluded several participants' data based on failing a fact test.

Participants selected one of the series: *Scandal* ($n = 58$), *This Is Us* ($n = 98$), *The Walking Dead* ($n = 121$), *Jersey Shore* ($n = 87$), *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* ($n = 105$), and *The Real Housewives of Orange County* ($n = 49$). They were asked to type in the name of the character or celebrity with whom they felt the strongest connection.

Participants indicated how they first watched the television series they selected. Responses included: when it originally aired on the network (including video on demand, DVR, etc. when not able to watch live) (61%), streaming service (e.g., Netflix, Hulu) (24.5%), or both (14.1%).

They were asked questions regarding their familiarity with the series they selected. They indicated how much of the series they had seen. Responses included: multiple episodes (24.3%), multiple seasons (one season or more in its entirety) (39%), or entire series (watched the entire series either when it aired or on a streaming service) (36.5%).

They were asked to indicate how many hours of the series they tend to watch in one sitting. Responses included: one hour or less (40.7%), 2 to 5 hours (54.4%), 5 to 7 hours (3.7%), 7 to 10 hours (.2%), 10 or more hours (1.0%). Netflix considers binge-watching as watching at least two episodes of the same television series in one sitting; therefore, those who indicated they tend to watch two to five hours, five to seven hours, or 10 or more hours were considered binge-watchers.

Participants were also asked about following and interacting (e.g., likes, comments, posts, shares) with the television series and its actors or celebrities on social media. Fifty-five percent (55%) of participants did not follow the television series on social media. Seventy-one percent (71%) did not follow their favorite actor from the scripted television series on social media, and 49% of people did not follow the celebrities on social media. Fifty-eight (58%) percent of participants did not interact with the series on social media, and 72.7% have not “live-tweeted” while viewing a live episode of the television series.

Measures

Independent Variables. One independent variable in this study is the television series each participant selected: *Scandal*, *This Is Us*, *The Walking Dead*, *Jersey Shore*, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, or *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. Other

independent variables include the gender of the participant and the gender of the character or celebrity they selected, as well as whether a participant is a binge-watcher or a non-binge-watcher.

Parasocial Interaction (PSI) Process. The three dimensions from Hartmann and Schramm's (2008) PSI scale were employed. The items were placed on seven-point Likert scales. The *perceptual-cognitive response* dimension included five of the six original questions: I carefully followed the behavior of *character*; I kept wondering if I knew people that were similar to *character*; I became aware of aspects of *character* that I liked; I kept asking myself how things would evolve around *character*; occasionally, I wondered if *character* was similar to me or not ($\alpha = .77, M = 4.26, SD = .84$). The *affective response* dimension included three of the four original questions: sometimes I really loved *character* for what they did; if *character* felt bad, I felt bad as well; if *character* felt good I felt good as well ($\alpha = .79, M = 5.13, SD = 1.18$). The *behavioral response* dimension included two of the three original questions: occasionally, I said something to *character* on impulse; Sometimes I felt like speaking out on *character* ($\alpha = .85, M = 3.98, SD = 1.75$).

Audience-Persona Interaction (API). Four dimensions from Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) API scale were used. The items were placed on seven-point Likert scales. The *identification with favorite character* dimension included six questions: *character* reminds me of myself; I have the same qualities as *character*; I seem to have the same beliefs or attitudes as *character*; I have the same problems as *character*; I can imagine myself as *character*; I can identify with *character* ($\alpha = .89, M = 4.60, SD = 1.24$).

The *interest in favorite character* dimensions included six questions: I would like to meet the actor who plays *character* (I would like to meet *celebrity*); I would watch the actor who plays *character* on another program (I would watch *celebrity* on another program); I enjoyed trying to predict what *character* would do; I hoped *character* would achieve their goals; I cared about what happened to *character*; I liked hearing the voice of *character* ($\alpha = .85, M = 5.60, SD = .91$).

The *group identification and interaction* dimension included six questions: *character's* interactions are similar to mine with friends; *character's* interactions are similar to mine with family; my friends are like *character*; I'd enjoy interacting with *character* and my friends at the same time; while watching, I felt included in the group; I can relate to *character's* attitudes ($\alpha = .86, M = 4.59, SD = 1.15$).

The *favorite character problem solving abilities* dimension included four questions: I wish I could handle problems as well as *character*; I like the way *character* handled problems; I would like to be more like *character*; I usually agreed with *character* ($\alpha = .86, M = 4.87, SD = 1.21$).

Identification. Five items from Tal-Or and Cohen's (2010) identification scale were used. The items were placed on seven-point Likert scales. Questions were slightly reworded to fit the purpose of this study. Questions included: I think I understand *character* well; I understood the events in the series the way *character* understood them; while viewing, I felt like *character* felt; during viewing, I could really "get inside" *character's* head; I tend to understand why *character* did what they did ($\alpha = .86, M = 5.08, SD = 1.03$).

Transportation. One dimension from Tal-Or and Cohen's (2010) transportation scale was employed. The items were placed on seven-point Likert scales. The *experience* dimension included four questions: I could imagine myself in the scenes I was watching; I was mentally involved in the scenes I was watching; I would like to know how the series ends; the scenes affected me emotionally ($\alpha = .80$, $M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.18$).

Audience Response. Two dimensions from Oliver and Bartsch's (2010) audience response scale were used. The items were placed on seven-point Likert scales. Questions were slightly reworded to fit the purpose of this study. Enjoyment was measured by including three questions from the *fun* dimension: it was fun for me to watch this series; I had a good time watching this series; the series was entertaining ($\alpha = .88$, $M = 6.00$, $SD = .99$). Appreciation was measured using two questions from the *moving/thought-provoking* dimension: I was moved by this series; I found this series to be very meaningful ($\alpha = .91$, $M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.71$). The lasting impression, suspense, and artistic value dimensions were not included in this study.

For final analysis, the conditions were collapsed. Participants that selected the three scripted television series (*Scandal*, *This Is Us*, and *The Walking Dead*) were put into one group, while participants selecting the reality television series (*Jersey Shore*, *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, and *The Real Housewives of Orange County*) were put into another group. Participants who indicated they tend to watch two to five hours, five to seven hours, or 10 or more hours were placed into the binge-watching group, while those who indicated they tend to watch one hour or less were placed into the non-binge-watching group.

IV. RESULTS

This purpose of this study was to examine participants' PSRs with characters in scripted television series and those with celebrities in reality television series and the role of gender in PSRs. It also evaluated the impact of binge-watching compared to watching on a weekly basis and participants' social media use with television series.

Hypothesis 1 predicted those in the binge-watching group would indicate stronger PSRs with characters than those in the non-binge-watching group. To test Hypothesis 1, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was computed for the independent variable binge-watching and the dependent variables: perceptual-cognitive response, affective response, behavioral response, identification with favorite character, interest in favorite character, group identification and interaction, favorite character problem-solving abilities, identification, and experience. The one-way ANOVA found both statistically significant differences and non-significant differences between the groups. The significant differences will be examined first.

The one-way ANOVA found statistically significant differences for the dependent variables: *behavioral response* $F(1, 514) = 9.43, p = .002, \eta^2 = .02$, and *identification with favorite character* $F(1, 514) = 3.79, p = .05, \eta^2 = .02$. When looking at the pattern of means, binge-watchers scored higher on *behavioral response* ($M = 4.94, SD = 1.33_{\text{binge}}$; $M = 3.84, SD = 1.76_{\text{non-binge}}$), *identification with favorite character* ($M = 5.03, SD = 1.25_{\text{binge}}$; $M = 4.53, SD = 1.25_{\text{non-binge}}$).

The one-way ANOVA found no significant differences for the dependent variables: *perceptual-cognitive response* $F(1, 513) = .88, p = .35, \eta^2 = .00$; *affective response* $F(1, 512) = .12, p = .73, \eta^2 = .00$; *interest in favorite character* $F(1, 510) = .004,$

$p = .95$, $\eta^2 = .00$; *group identification and interaction* $F(1, 513) = 3.13$, $p = .06$, $\eta^2 = .01$;
favorite character problem-solving abilities $F(1, 513) = .42$, $p = .52$, $\eta^2 = .00$;
identification $F(1, 515) = .29$, $p = .59$, $\eta^2 = .00$; and *experience* $F(1, 512) = 1.88$, $p = .17$,
 $\eta^2 = .00$.

When looking at the pattern of means, binge-watchers scored higher on *perceptual-cognitive response* ($M = 4.41$, $SD = .95_{\text{binge}}$; $M = 4.25$, $SD = .85_{\text{non-binge}}$), *affective response* ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.19_{\text{binge}}$; $M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.19_{\text{non-binge}}$), *group identification and interaction* ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.10_{\text{binge}}$; $M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.16_{\text{non-binge}}$), *favorite character problem-solving abilities* ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.12_{\text{binge}}$; $M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.24_{\text{non-binge}}$), *identification* ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.02_{\text{binge}}$; $M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.05_{\text{non-binge}}$), and *experience* ($M = 5.34$, $SD = 1.00_{\text{binge}}$; $M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.21_{\text{non-binge}}$). Those in the non-binge-watching group scored higher on the dependent variables of *interest in favorite character* ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 1.09_{\text{binge}}$; $M = 5.45$, $SD = 1.01_{\text{non-binge}}$). Therefore Hypothesis 1 was partially supported. Those in the binge-watching group indicated stronger PSRs with characters compared to those in the non-binge-watching group; however, there were several variables where the differences were not statistically significant. The pattern of means supports the idea that binge-watching strengthens PSRs. See Table 1 for a complete list of means and standard deviations.

Hypothesis 2 predicted those watching reality television series would indicate stronger PSRs compared to those that selected scripted television series. An ANOVA was computed for the independent variable type of television series and the dependent variables: perceptual cognitive responses, affective response, behavioral response, identification with favorite character, interest in favorite character, group identification

and interaction, identification, and experience. The one-way ANOVA found statistically significant differences for the dependent variables: *perceptual cognitive response* $F(1, 514) = 12.13, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$; *affective response* $F(1, 513) = 21.61, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$; *identification with favorite character* $F(1, 515) = 15.40, p = .00, \eta^2 = .03$; *interest in favorite character* $F(1, 511) = 16.81, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$; *favorite character problem-solving abilities* $F(1, 514) = 25.68, p = .00, \eta^2 = .05$; *identification* $F(1, 516) = 31.77, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$; *experience* $F(1, 513) = 97.12, p < .001, \eta^2 = .20$. When looking at the pattern of means, those that selected a scripted television series indicated higher scores on *perceptual-cognitive response* ($M = 4.38, SD = .76_{\text{scripted}}; M = 4.12, SD = .93_{\text{reality}}$), *affective response* ($M = 5.35, SD = 1.10_{\text{scripted}}; M = 4.87, SD = 1.25_{\text{reality}}$), *identification with favorite character* ($M = 4.76, SD = 1.03; M = 4.33, SD = 1.43_{\text{reality}}$), *interest in favorite character* ($M = 5.62, SD = .92_{\text{scripted}}; M = 5.26, SD = 1.10_{\text{reality}}$), *favorite character problem-solving abilities* ($M = 5.09, SD = 1.08_{\text{scripted}}; M = 4.56, SD = 1.33_{\text{reality}}$), *identification* ($M = 5.29, SD = .91_{\text{scripted}}; M = 4.79, SD = 1.13_{\text{reality}}$), *experience* ($M = 5.47, SD = .97_{\text{scripted}}; M = 4.51, SD = 1.24_{\text{reality}}$).

The one-way ANOVA found no significant differences for the dependent variables: *behavioral response* $F(1, 515) = .03, p = .87, \eta^2 = .00$, and *group identification and interaction* $F(1, 514) = 3.22, p = .08, \eta^2 = .01$. Participants watching scripted television series scored higher on the *behavioral response* ($M = 3.91, SD = 1.78$) than those watching reality television series ($M = 3.88, SD = 1.73$). They also indicated higher scores on the *group identification and interaction* ($M = 4.63, SD = 1.06$) than those watching reality television series ($M = 4.45, SD = 1.27$). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. The pattern of means and the results indicate the opposite of what was

predicted. Those in the scripted television series group indicate stronger PSRs with their favorite characters compared to those in the reality television series group. See Table 2 for a complete list of means and standard deviations.

Hypothesis 3 predicted viewers were more likely to interact with social media pages of reality television series compared to those of scripted television series. Descriptive statistics were used to examine this hypothesis. Participants were more likely to interact with scripted television series on social media (45% indicated they had done so) compared to reality television series on social media (24.6% indicated they had done so).

Hypothesis 4 predicted females would have stronger PSRs with characters compared to males. An ANOVA was computed for the independent variable gender and the dependent variables: perceptual cognitive responses, affective response, behavioral response, identification with favorite character, interest in favorite character, group identification and interaction, identification, and experience. The one-way ANOVA found statistically significant differences for the dependent variables: *affective response* $F(1, 508) = 8.92, p = .003, \eta^2 = .02$; *behavioral response* $F(1, 510) = 10.03, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$; *interest in favorite character* $F(1, 506) = 7.23, p = .01, \eta^2 = .01$; and *favorite character problem-solving abilities* $F(1, 509) = 3.86, p = .05, \eta^2 = .01$.

Males indicated higher scores on the *behavioral response* ($M = 4.13, SD = 1.72_{\text{male}}; M = 3.65, SD = 1.75_{\text{female}}$), *identification with favorite character* ($M = 4.64, SD = 1.25_{\text{male}}; M = 4.46, SD = 1.23_{\text{female}}$), *favorite character problem-solving abilities* ($M = 4.93, SD = 1.18_{\text{male}}; M = 4.72, SD = 1.28_{\text{female}}$). Females scored higher on *affective*

response ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.25_{\text{male}}$; $M = 5.31$, $SD = 1.10_{\text{female}}$) and *interest in favorite character* ($M = 5.34$, $SD = 1.07_{\text{male}}$; $M = 5.59$, $SD = .95_{\text{female}}$).

The ANOVA indicated non-significant findings for the independent variable of gender on the dependent variables of *perceptual-cognitive response* $F(1, 509) = 1.03$, $p = .31$, $\eta^2 = .00$; *identification API* $F(1, 510) = 2.81$, $p = .09$, $\eta^2 = .01$; *group identification and interaction* $F(1, 509) = 1.95$, $p = .16$, $\eta^2 = .00$; *identification* $F(1, 511) = .68$, $p = .41$, $\eta^2 = .00$; and *experience* $F(1, 508) = .21$, $p = .65$, $\eta^2 = .00$. When examining the pattern of means, males indicated higher on the dependent variables of *group identification and interaction* ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.15_{\text{male}}$; $M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.18_{\text{female}}$) and *identification* ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.03_{\text{male}}$; $M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.06_{\text{female}}$). Females indicated higher scores on *perceptual-cognitive response* ($M = 4.23$, $SD = .91_{\text{male}}$; $M = 4.30$, $SD = .78_{\text{female}}$) and *experience* ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.13_{\text{male}}$; $M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.28_{\text{female}}$). Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was not supported. The pattern of means and the results indicate the opposite of what was predicted. Males indicated stronger PSRs with their favorite characters compared to females on most dependent variables. See Table 3 for a complete list of means and standard deviations.

Hypothesis 5 predicted viewers who score higher on the audience response scale would indicate stronger PSRs with their favorite characters. A one-way ANOVA was computed for the independent variable low audience response group or high audience response group and the dependent variables of: perceptual-cognitive response, affective response, behavioral response, identification with favorite character, interest in favorite character, group identification and interaction, favorite character problem-solving abilities, identification, and experience. The one-way ANOVA found statistically

significant differences for all dependent variables: *perceptual-cognitive response* $F(1, 504) = 112.46, p < .001, \eta^2 = .18$; *affective response* $F(1, 503) = 167.26, p < .001, \eta^2 = .25$; *behavioral response* $F(1, 505) = 48.91, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$; *identification with favorite character* $F(1, 506) = 91.88, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$; *interest in favorite character* $F(1, 502) = 154.98, p < .001, \eta^2 = .24$; *group identification and interaction* $F(1, 504) = 94.17, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$; *favorite character problem-solving abilities* $F(1, 505) = 92.81, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$; *identification* $F(1, 506) = 117.47, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$; *experience* $F(1, 504) = 347.07, p < .001, \eta^2 = .41$.

When examining the pattern of means, those in the high audience response group indicated higher scores on all the dependent variables: *perceptual-cognitive response* ($M = 3.70, SD = .91_{\text{low}}; M = 4.50, SD = .71_{\text{high}}$), *affective response* ($M = 4.23, SD = 1.21_{\text{low}}; M = 5.53, SD = .96_{\text{high}}$), *behavioral response* ($M = 3.09, SD = 1.59_{\text{low}}; M = 4.23, SD = 1.73_{\text{high}}$), *identification with favorite character* ($M = 3.81, SD = 1.31_{\text{low}}; M = 4.88, SD = 1.08_{\text{high}}$), *interest in favorite character* ($M = 4.71, SD = 1.06_{\text{low}}; M = 5.79, SD = .82_{\text{high}}$), *group identification and interaction* ($M = 3.84, SD = 1.15_{\text{low}}; M = 4.85, SD = 1.04_{\text{high}}$), *favorite character problem solving* ($M = 4.10, SD = 1.28_{\text{low}}; M = 5.16, SD = 1.08_{\text{high}}$), *identification* ($M = 4.37, SD = 1.11_{\text{low}}; M = 5.36, SD = .87_{\text{high}}$), and *experience* ($M = 3.86, SD = 1.01_{\text{low}}; M = 5.54, SD = .89_{\text{high}}$). Hypothesis 5 was supported. Participants who scored higher on the audience response scale indicated stronger PSRs with their favorite characters. See Table 4 for a complete list of means and standard deviations.

Research Question 1 asked whether there was a positive correlation between the gender of the participant and the gender of the character or celebrity they selected. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship

between gender of participant and gender of character. There was a statistically significant positive association ($r(518) = .40, p < .001$). The gender of a viewer and the gender of their favorite character or celebrity has an impact on PSR.

Table 1

Differences in Viewing Variables

	Binge-watch	Non-binge-watch
Perceptual-Cognitive Response	4.41(.95)	4.25(.85)
Affective Response	5.21(1.19)	5.12(1.19)
Behavioral Response	4.94(1.33)*	3.84(1.76)
Identification with Favorite Character	5.03(1.25)*	4.53(1.25)
Interest in Favorite Character	5.44(1.09)	5.45(1.01)
Group Identification and Interaction	4.96(1.10)	4.52(1.16)
Favorite Character Problem-Solving Abilities	4.99(1.12)	4.83(1.24)
Identification	5.17(1.02)	5.05(1.05)
Experience	5.34(1.00)	5.05(1.05)

Notes: Means and standard deviations (shown in parentheses) for variables. Perceptual-

cognitive, affective and behavioral responses were measured using Hartmann and

Schramm's (2008) PSI scale. Identification with favorite character, interest in favorite

character, group identification and interaction, and favorite character problem-solving

abilities were measured using Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) API scale. Identification and

experience were measured using Tal-Or and Cohen's (2010) identification scale. All

items were placed on seven-point Likert scales.

* = Statistically significant difference between the two groups ($p < .05$)

Table 2*Differences in Television Series Variables*

	Scripted Television Series	Reality Television Series
Perceptual-Cognitive Response	4.38(.76)*	4.12(.93)
Affective Response	5.35(1.10)*	4.87(1.25)
Behavioral Response	3.91(1.78)	3.88(1.73)
Identification with Favorite Character	4.76(1.03)*	4.33(1.43)
Interest in Favorite Character	5.62(.92)*	5.26(1.10)
Group Identification and Interaction	4.63(1.06)	4.45(1.27)
Favorite Character Problem-Solving Abilities	5.09(1.08)*	4.56(1.33)
Identification	5.29(.91)*	4.79(1.13)
Experience	5.47(.97)*	4.51(1.24)

Notes: Means and standard deviations (shown in parentheses) for variables. Perceptual-cognitive, affective and behavioral responses were measured using Hartmann and Schramm's (2008) PSI scale. Identification with favorite character, interest in favorite character, group identification and interaction, and favorite character problem-solving abilities were measured using Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) API scale. Identification and experience were measured using Tal-Or and Cohen's (2010) identification scale. All items were placed on seven-point Likert scales.

* = Statistically significant difference between the two groups ($p < .05$)

Table 3*Differences in Gender Variables*

	Male	Female
Perceptual-Cognitive Response	4.23(.91)	4.30(.78)
Affective Response	5.00(1.25)*	5.31(1.10)
Behavioral Response	4.13(1.72)*	3.65(1.75)
Identification with Favorite Character	4.64(1.25)	4.46(1.23)
Interest in Favorite Character	5.34(1.07)*	5.59(.95)
Group Identification and Interaction	4.62(1.15)	4.48(1.18)
Favorite Character Problem-Solving Abilities	4.93(1.18)*	4.72(1.28)
Identification	5.09(1.03)	5.02(1.06)
Experience	5.00(1.13)	5.05(1.28)

Notes: Means and standard deviations (shown in parentheses) for variables. Perceptual-

cognitive, affective and behavioral responses were measured using Hartmann and

Schramm's (2008) PSI scale. Identification with favorite character, interest in favorite

character, group identification and interaction, and favorite character problem-solving

abilities were measured using Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) API scale. Identification and

experience were measured using Tal-Or and Cohen's (2010) identification scale. All

items were placed on seven-point Likert scales.

* = Statistically significant difference between the two groups ($p < .05$)

Table 4*Differences in Audience Response Variables*

	Low Audience Response	High Audience Response
Perceptual-Cognitive Response	3.70(.91)*	4.50(.71)
Affective Response	4.23(1.21)*	5.53(.96)
Behavioral Response	3.09(1.59)*	4.23(1.21)
Identification with Favorite Character	3.81(1.31)*	4.88(1.08)
Interest in Favorite Character	4.71(1.06)*	5.79(.82)
Group Identification and Interaction	3.84(1.15)*	4.85(1.04)
Favorite Character Problem-Solving Abilities	4.10(1.28)*	5.16(1.08)
Identification	4.37(1.11)*	5.36(.87)
Experience	3.86(1.01)*	5.54(.89)

Notes: Means and standard deviations (shown in parentheses) for variables. Perceptual-cognitive, affective and behavioral responses were measured using Hartmann and Schramm's (2008) PSI scale. Identification with favorite character, interest in favorite character, group identification and interaction, and favorite character problem-solving abilities were measured using Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) API scale. Identification and experience were measured using Tal-Or and Cohen's (2010) identification scale. All items were placed on seven-point Likert scales.

* = Statistically significant difference between the two groups ($p < .05$)

V. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to compare participants' PSRs with characters in scripted television series and those with celebrities in reality television series and examine the role of gender in PSRs. It also evaluated the impact of binge-watching compared to watching on a weekly basis.

Hypothesis 1 predicted those in the binge-watching group would indicate stronger PSRs with characters and celebrities compared to those in the non-binge-watching group. The binge-watching group indicated stronger PSRs with characters compared with those in the non-binge-watching group. In other words, binge-watching strengthens PSRs between viewers and characters in television series. The findings support previous research indicating binge-watching is positively associated with television affinity, television viewing motives, and ritualistic television viewing behaviors (Wheeler, 2015). Previous research demonstrates watching on weekly-basis has a greater and more positive effect on PSRs because when viewers binge-watch, they have less time to think about the series and build anticipation for the next episode (Ferchaud, 2018). Nevertheless, PSRs were not examined with celebrities in reality television series; therefore, this study suggests viewers exhibit stronger PSRs with these types of characters because they are real people. Having an awareness of audience members viewing habits leads to a better understanding of the connections and relationships they form with characters in television series.

Hypothesis 2 predicted those that selected a reality television series would indicate stronger PSRs compared with those who selected a scripted television series. Participants in the scripted television series group indicate stronger PSRs with characters

in scripted television series than those with celebrities in reality television series. The findings do not support previous research demonstrating viewers' PSRs are stronger when the technique of breaking the fourth wall is engaged (Dibble et al., 2016).

Similarly, viewers watching an interactive or responsive version of an episode indicate stronger PSI (Auter & Davis, 1991). Previous research also suggests viewers experience a parasocial encounter when the illusion of being engaged in a social interaction occurs with a television performer, and viewers encounter a more intense parasocial experience if they are addressed by the television performer (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Moreover, audience members have been found to be cognitively, affectively and, behaviorally tied to reality television personalities (Haigh & Wigley, 2015).

Because the findings indicate viewers demonstrate stronger PSRs with characters in scripted television series, participants were possibly more familiar with these characters and were more able to relate them. Consequently, they developed a connection and formed a stronger relationship. Scripted television series may feature storylines that are similar to viewers' lives, whereas reality television series may focus on more luxurious lifestyles. Even though the actors are not real people like in reality television series, viewers may relate to the storylines being presented in scripted television series.

Hypothesis 3 predicted viewers were more likely to interact with social media pages of reality television series than those of scripted television series. However, using descriptive statistics, results indicate participants are more likely to interact with social media pages of scripted television series. This prediction was not supported, and the findings do not support previous research indicating fans take to social media to demonstrate their support for reality stars (Haigh & Wigley, 2015). In addition, fans

support reality stars in times of crisis because they are motivated to post on social media (Haigh, 2015). While previous research indicates fans are likely to support celebrities in reality television series, the findings indicate viewers interact with social media pages of scripted television series and its actors. This may be because the actors are real people and not the characters they portray in television series, and viewers are able to follow their real lives.

Hypothesis 4 predicted females would demonstrate stronger PSRs with characters and celebrities than males would. Males scored higher on behavioral response, identification with favorite character, and favorite character problem-solving abilities; while females scored higher on affective response and interest in favorite character. Due to these results, this prediction was not supported because males indicate stronger PSRs with their favorite characters and celebrities compared to females. The findings do not support previous research regarding the role of gender because females are likely to engage in PSRs with media characters at a young age (Newman, 2018). Similarly, females exhibit increased PSI when they experience certain types of loneliness (Wang et al., 2008).

Previous research also indicates female viewers tend to admire the attractiveness of media personae more than men do; therefore, females demonstrate stronger PSRs (Vorderer, 1996). Women also tend to form stronger PSIs with characters in soap operas (Turner, 1993). While females demonstrate forming stronger PSRs than men in various instances, the findings suggest males are more likely to experience increased PSR. Other research indicates no gender differences in and identification with characters and

celebrities (Cohen & Perse, 2003). The role of gender proves to be important in predicting the strength of PSRs.

Hypothesis 5 predicted viewers who score higher on the audience response scale would indicate stronger PSRs with their favorite characters and celebrities. Participants were categorized in a low audience response group and a high audience response group. This prediction was supported because participants who scored higher on the audience response scale indicated stronger PSRs with their favorite characters and celebrities. In other words, if a viewer enjoys and appreciates a television series, they will develop a stronger PSR with one of its characters. The findings support previous research demonstrating viewers become more involved and engaged in a narrative and become immersed within the story (Ferchaud, 2018). When viewers find a television series fun, moving, and thought-provoking, there are more likely to feel connections and develop relationships with its characters, demonstrating the narrative of a television series plays a large role in the strength of PSRs.

Research Question 1 asked whether there was a positive correlation between the gender of the participant and the gender of the character or celebrity they selected. A correlation coefficient assessed the relationship between the gender of the participants and the gender of the character or celebrity and indicated a positive association. In other words, the gender of a viewer and the gender of a character or celebrity with whom they feel a connection has an impact on PSR. The findings support previous research indicating fans supporting a female reality star were of both genders (Haigh & Wigley, 2015). In addition, audiences tend to favor characters of their own gender (Hoffner, 1996). PSIs and PSRs with female characters tends to be more intense than those with

male characters (Vorderer, 1996). Because the role of gender has an impact on audience members' PSRs with characters and celebrities, evaluating who viewers relate to in television series is important.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

This study was limited within the demographics of the respondents because more than three-fourths (76.6%) of the participants were Caucasian, even though Amazon Mechanical Turk was used for data collection. In addition, there were limitations due to participants' responses to the question regarding their character selection. They were asked to type in the name of the character or celebrity with whom they felt the strongest connection. Many participants entered the name of a character or celebrity that did not exist in any of the television series. Because of this, these participants were removed from the data analysis.

To have a better understanding of viewers' PSRs with characters and celebrities, future studies should include a more diverse group of participants. The role of race and ethnicity in PSRs can be evaluated as well. The survey should include a list of characters from each television series to prevent participants from writing an incorrect name of a character or celebrity. Moreover, future directions for this study include examining age in relation to PSRs between characters and binge-watchers, as well as non-binge-watchers, and a longitudinal study can be performed to evaluate the changes in PSI and PSR when looking at the relationship process.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study compared participants' parasocial relationships (PSRs) with characters in scripted television series and celebrities in reality television series and

examined the role of gender in PSRs. It also evaluated the impact of binge-watching compared with watching on a weekly basis. Participants took part in a survey and responded to questions regarding one of three scripted television series and one of its characters or one of three reality television series and one of its celebrities.

The study found binge-watching strengthens PSRs between viewers and characters and celebrities in television series, and it demonstrated viewers indicate stronger PSRs with characters in scripted television series compared with those with celebrities in reality television series. The study also found viewers are more likely to interact with scripted television series on social media. Moreover, it demonstrated males indicate stronger PSRs with their favorite characters and celebrities compared with females, and that the gender of a viewer and the gender of a character or celebrity with whom they feel a connection has an impact on PSR. In addition, it found viewers who enjoy and appreciate a television series demonstrate stronger PSRs with its characters.

Understanding the relationships viewers form with characters in series they view is essential to television providers. If content creators are more aware of the characters viewers gravitate towards, identify with, and form deeper connections with, they will have a greater ability of retaining their audience members. By having this knowledge, industry professionals have the ability cater to their viewers by creating characters and storylines they identify with; therefore, audience members will connect on a deeper level with characters and celebrities and continue to tune in to multiple seasons of television series.

APPENDIX SECTION

A. IMPLIED CONSENT FORM47

B. SURVEY QUESTIONS49

APPENDIX A: IMPLIED CONSENT FORM

Paloma Gray, a graduate student at Texas State University, is conducting a research study to evaluate viewers' connections with characters in scripted and reality television series. These connections are referred to as parasocial relationships.

Participation is voluntary, and you may exit at any time. There are no consequences for choosing to discontinue your participation. However, if you do stop your participation, you will not be paid \$1.

The survey will take approximately 20 minutes or less to complete.

This study involves no foreseeable serious risks. Please try to answer all questions; however, if there are any items that make you uncomfortable or that you would prefer to skip, you may leave the answer blank.

Participants will gain first-hand knowledge and experience of participating in a research study. They will also help researchers identify how people form relationships with characters and reality stars on television.

The research does not ask for any information that would identify who the responses belong to. Therefore, your responses are completely anonymous. If this research is published, no information that could identify you will be written because your identity is in no way linked to your responses.

Participants who complete this survey will receive \$1 in compensation.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the following:

Paloma Gray
Graduate Student
Mass Communication
palomagr@txstate.edu
(915) 929-2685

Michel Haigh
Faculty Advisor
Mass Communication
mmh204@txstate.edu
(512) 245-7238

This project 2018665 was approved by the Texas State IRB on June 4, 2018.

Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to Dr. Denise Gobert, IRB

Chair, at (512) 245-8351 or dgobert@txstate.edu, or to Monica Gonzales, IRB
Regulatory Manager, at (512) 245-2334 or meg201@txstate.edu.

If you consent to participate, please click **Yes** and complete the survey.

If you would prefer not to participate, please click **No**.

APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Television Series Selection

Please select which one of these scripted or reality television series you have watched. You will be responding to questions regarding this series and one of its characters.

This Is Us

The Walking Dead

Scandal

Jersey Shore

The Real Housewives of Orange County

Keeping up with the Kardashians

None of the above

Please note, the scales auto-populate with the name of the television series throughout the survey.

Familiarity

Please indicate how you first watched *television series*.

When it originally aired on the network (includes video on demand, DVR, etc. when not able to watch it live)

Streaming service (e.g., Netflix, Hulu)

Both

Please indicate how much of *television series* you have watched.

Multiple episodes

Multiple seasons (one season or more in its entirety)

Entire series (either when it aired on the network or on a streaming service)

Please indicate how many hours of *television series* you tend to watch in one sitting.

1 hour or less

2 to 5 hours

5 to 7 hours

7 to 10 hours

More than 10 hours

Audience Response

Please indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements.

Strongly disagree Disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat agree Agree Strongly agree

It was fun for me to watch *television series*

I had a good time watching *television series*

television series was entertaining.

I was moved by *television series*

I found *television series* to be very meaningful.

Transportation

Please indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements.

Strongly disagree Disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat agree Agree Strongly agree

I could imagine myself in the scenes I was watching.

I was mentally involved in the scenes I was watching.

I would like to know how *television series* ends.

The scenes affected me emotionally.

Character Selection

Based on the series you selected, please type in the name of the character or celebrity with whom you feel the strongest connection.

Please note, the scales auto-populate with the name of the character or celebrity throughout the survey.

Parasocial Interaction (PSI) Process

Please indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements.

Strongly disagree Disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat agree Agree Strongly agree

I carefully followed the behavior of *character*.

I kept wondering if I knew people that were similar to *character*.

I became aware of aspects of *character* that I liked

I kept asking myself how things would evolve around *character*.

Occasionally, I wondered if *character* was similar to me or not.

Sometimes I really loved *character* for what they did.

If *character* felt bad, I felt bad as well.

If *character* felt good, I felt good as well.

Occasionally, I said something to *character* on impulse.

Sometimes I felt like speaking out on *character*.

Audience-Persona Interaction (API)

Character reminds me of myself.

I have the same qualities as *character*.

I seem to have the same beliefs or attitudes as *character*.

I have the same problems as *character*.

I can imagine myself as *character*.

I can identify with *character*.

I would like to meet the actor who plays *character*./I would like to meet *celebrity*.

I would watch the actor who plays *character* on another program./I would watch *celebrity* on another program.

I enjoyed trying to predict what *character* would do.

I hoped *character* would achieve their goals.
I cared about what happened to *character*.
I liked hearing the voice of *character*.

Character's interactions are similar to mine with friends.
Character's interactions are similar to mine with family.
My friends are like *character*.
I'd enjoy interacting with *character* and my friends at the same time.
While watching *television series*, I felt included in the group.
I can relate to *character*'s attitudes.

I wish I could handle problems as well as *character*.
I like the way *character* handled problems.
I would like to be more like *character*.
I usually agreed with *character*.

Identification

I think I understand *character* well.
I understood the events in the *television series* the way *character* understood them.
While viewing, I felt like *character* felt.
During viewing, I could really "get inside" *character*'s head.
I tend to understand why *character* did what they did.

Social Media

Do you follow *television series* on its official social media pages (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)?

Yes
No

Have you ever interacted with the social media pages of this *television series* (e.g., likes, comments, posts, shares)?

Yes
No

When viewing live, have you ever live-tweeted about *television series*?

Yes
No

Do you follow actor/celebrity on their official social media pages (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)?

Yes
No

Have you ever interacted with the social media pages of this actor/celebrity? (e.g., likes, comments, posts, shares)?

Yes

No

Demographics

What is your age?

What is your gender?

Female

Male

Other

Prefer not to say

What is your highest level of education completed? If currently enrolled, choose the highest degree received.

High school graduate (diploma or GED)

Associate's degree

Bachelor's degree

Master's degree

Professional degree

Doctorate degree

What is your race?

Asian/Pacific Islander

Black/African American

Hispanic/Latino

White

Other

What is your annual household income?

Under \$25,000

Between \$25,000 and \$34,999

Between \$35,000 and \$44,499

Between \$45,000 and \$54,999

Between \$55,000 and \$59,999

Between \$60,000 and \$74,999

Between \$75,000 and \$89,999

Between \$90,000 and \$100,000

More than \$100,000

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