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Young Adults' Wishful Identification With Television Characters: The Role of Perceived Similarity and Character Attributes

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In this study, 208 young adults completed questionnaires measuring their perceptions of and responses to their favorite fictional television characters, both male and female. Measures included perceived attitude similarity, perceived character attributes (smart, successful, attractive, funny, violent, admired), and wishful identification with the characters. *Wishful identification* was defined as the desire to be like or act like the character. Respondents reported greater wishful identification with same-gender characters and with characters who seemed more similar in attitudes. Both men and women identified more strongly with successful and admired characters of the other gender, but they differed in the attributes that predicted their wishful identification with same-gender characters. Men identified with male characters whom they perceived as successful, intelligent, and violent, whereas women identified with female characters whom they perceived as successful, intelligent, attractive, and admired. Humor was the only attribute that was not related to wishful identification. Interpretations of the findings, and implications for understanding the social impact of television, are discussed.

What motivates individuals to watch a television series regularly and to care what happens from week to week? Anecdotal and research evidence suggest that the characters who populate the programs play a key role in generating and maintaining audiences (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Many television executives believe that

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the presence of likable, intriguing characters is a key component of a successful program (Gitlin, 1983). People have a fundamental need to form connections with other people, and television offers audience members access to a wide range of other human beings. Over time, viewers become familiar with characters and performers on continuing series and often feel as though they know these individuals as well as they know their friends and neighbors. The importance of characters to viewers frequently extends beyond the viewing situation to include the sense of having personal relationships with the characters, deep concern about what happens in their "lives," and/or a desire to become like them in significant ways (Giles, 2002; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991).

Identification with media characters is one outcome of television viewing that is believed to mediate audience responses. However, the concept of identification has been defined in many different ways. Theorists as diverse as Sigmund Freud, Kenneth Burke, and Herbert Kelman have employed identification in their work. Each of these theorists applied the concept in different contexts, but their definitions share common elements. All of the definitions involve a bond or connection between an individual and another person (or entity), such that the individual adopts traits, attitudes, or behaviors of the other person, or incorporates the other's characteristics into his or her sense of self (see Basil, 1996; Wright, 1994; Zillmann, 1994). In his Social Cognitive Theory, Albert Bandura (1986, 2001) similarly described "psychological matching processes," through which an observer changes his or her thought patterns, emotional responses, and/or behaviors to match those of another person. This process clearly has a motivational component (Bandura, 2001). People identify with other individuals (or groups), in part, in an effort to achieve rewards or other valued outcomes—such as forming interpersonal connections, maximizing their own potential, or enhancing their self-esteem. Identification with others can provide a range of benefits, although there are risks as well, because the outcomes depend, in part, on the choice of identification figure (Basil, 1996; Mael & Ashforth, 2001; Wright, 1994).

In the mass media literature, the term *identification* with a character has been used in many ways, with some authors equating identification with related but distinct responses to characters such as liking and perceived similarity (see Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). However, two definitions of identification seem to have been explicated and employed most often. First, identification sometimes refers to the process by which an individual puts him- or herself in the place of a character and vicariously participates in the character's experiences during a program. Cohen (2001) employed this definition, arguing that, through identification, a viewer loses his or her own identity and assumes the identity of a media character. Rosengren and Windahl (1972) called this process "capture." Zillmann (1994) contended that true identification with a character during a media presentation (in the sense of sharing his or her identity) is rare, because a viewer typically has information about the plot that is unavailable to the character and thus cannot share the

character's perspective. However, Cohen (2001) argued that this form of identification is temporary and fleeting and may vary in intensity during a program. Rosengren, Windahl, Hakansson, and Johnsson-Smaragdi (1976) developed a short self-report scale to measure this type of response, using such items as "Sometimes when I'm watching this program, I believe that I'm really one of the people in the story."

Second, many scholars have recognized that the process of identification can extend beyond the viewing situation. After describing responses to characters while viewing, Rosengren et al. (1976) noted that "equally or even more important are those relationships which extend beyond the moment of viewing. … Most important, perhaps, is identification regarded as a more durable phenomenon—'long-term identification' with one or more of the personae of the media world" (p. 349). They measured this type of identification with items such as "I would really love to be like the people in this programme." The phrase *wishful identification* has been used to describe this type of response—a psychological process through which an individual desires or attempts to become like another person (v. Feilitzen & Linne, 1975; Hoffner, 1996). For example, Adams-Price and Greene (1990) found that the most common form of celebrity attachment reported by adolescents was "identificatory attachment," or the desire to be like or become the celebrity. Bandura (1986, 2001) contended that the modeling process goes far beyond simple imitation of behavior, to include the changing of attitudes, values, aspirations, and other characteristics to match those of a model.

These two definitions of identification probably represent separate components of a complex process, with one describing a response that audience members have during a media presentation, and the other describing a long-term consequence of media exposure. This study focuses on responses to characters that extend beyond the viewing situation. Hence identification is conceptualized in this study as *wishful identification*, or the desire to become like a media character.

Research indicates that identification with media characters can have significant social and psychological consequences. Caughey (1986) and Boone and Lomore (2001) reported that audience members made changes in their appearance, attitudes, values, activities, and other characteristics to become more like admired celebrities. In a study of online fans of the television show *My So-Called Life*, Murray (1999) found that teen girls frequently attempted to emulate the lead character, Angela, by dressing like her, dyeing their hair red (like hers), or acting in similar ways. Research has also shown that identification with media characters affects adoption or rejection of specific behaviors or life goals. Austin and her colleagues reported that identification with characters in advertisements was related to children's expectancies about alcohol use, which in turn was associated with actual drinking behavior (e.g., Austin & Meili, 1994; Austin, Pinkelton, & Fujioka, 2000). Harrison (1997) found that identification with thin media characters was associated with higher levels of disordered eating behaviors. Television role models

also influence young people's occupational aspirations (e.g., Christiansen, 1979; Hoffner et al., in press; King & Multon, 1996). Finally, fictional programs designed to educate as well as entertain have been shown to promote positive social and behavioral change, in part because audience members are motivated to emulate characters with whom they have developed close relationships (e.g., Brown & Cody, 1991; Papa et al., 2000).

This study examines factors that affect wishful identification with fictional television characters, focusing on the role of perceived similarity and character attributes. Although most of the relevant prior research has involved children, this study focuses on young adults.

SIMILARITY

The interpersonal research literature documents a strong positive association between similarity and interpersonal attraction (Berscheid & Walster, 1983; Duck & Barnes, 1992; Tan & Singh, 1995). People expect that similar individuals will provide rewarding interactions and that they are likely to convey personally relevant information. Research has also shown that perceived similarity is related to the desire to emulate the behavior and characteristics of others (Bandura, 1986; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Yet this association may seem somewhat counterintuitive, because people often want to be like others whom they perceive as *dissimilar* to themselves in important ways—for example, others whom they regard as more successful, more talented, or wealthier than themselves. Apparently, perceiving similarity to another person *in some ways* seems to promote the desire to be like that individual *in other ways*—especially ways that are perceived as favorable or rewarding. Based on the work of Bandura (1969), Hoffner and Cantor (1991) argued that "some degree of similarity to media characters seems to promote a desire to be like them, possibly because certain similarities signal that it is both possible and appropriate for the viewer to become like the character in additional ways" (p. 87).

What kinds of similarity are important in a mass media context? Viewers tend to feel similar to characters who are like themselves in terms of demographic characteristics such as gender, race, and age (e.g., Appiah, 2001; Austin, Roberts, & Nass, 1990; Harwood, 1999; Reeves & Miller, 1978). Individuals may also perceive similarities in deeper, less obvious personal characteristics such as personality, behavioral tendencies, or life experiences (e.g., v. Feilitzen & Linne, 1975; Murray, 1999; Turner, 1993). Perceived similarities in these types of fundamental characteristics seem to facilitate the desire to become more like a character in other ways—for example, by emulating the character's attitudes, appearance, behavior, or other characteristics.

Wishful identification occurs more readily with same-gender characters, although several studies with children found that this pattern was stronger for boys than for girls (e.g., Hoffner, 1996; Miller & Reeves, 1976). This outcome may reflect the fact that male characters generally have more varied or exciting roles (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999), or that it is more socially acceptable for females than for males to behave in ways traditionally associated with the other gender (Deaux & Lafrance, 1998). Other studies reported greater wishful identification with characters who are the same race (e.g., Austin et al., 1990; Greenberg, 1972). Wishful identification is also enhanced by similarities that go beyond demographics. For example, McDonald and Kim (2001) found that children were more likely to imitate characters in computer games when they perceived a greater similarity in personality between themselves and the characters. Eyal and Rubin (2003) found that a generalized measure of attitude and background similarity was associated with greater identification with aggressive television characters. Murray (1999) wrote that teens' identification with Angela on *My So-Called Life* was motivated in part by the "similarities between the narrative trajectories of Angela's life and their own" (pp. 225–226). One of the reasons people give for watching soap operas and other television series is that the characters' experiences suggest useful ways for the viewers to deal with their own problems (e.g., Greenberg, Neuendorf, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Henderson, 1982). This may be one reason that television producers often show average or typical characters successfully confronting serious personal difficulties, such as drug or alcohol dependence, poverty, or a serious illness (e.g., Brown & Cody, 1991; Papa et al., 2000).

CHARACTER ATTRIBUTES

Wishful identification is also influenced by the manner in which characters are portrayed (Bandura, 1986). Research has shown that viewers evaluate media characters in much the same way they evaluate real people in their social networks. Viewers assess characters' personality traits and develop impressions and expectations of their behaviors (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Reeves & Nass, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 2001). Television programs are carefully cast, with the characters' physical appearance, speech patterns, manner of dress, and other characteristics chosen as a "shorthand" method of character development (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Turow, 1978). Moreover, the information viewers receive about the characters is scripted, designed specifically to produce a particular impression in an efficient manner. Camera angles, close-ups, and editing techniques influence viewers' selection and interpretation of character-relevant information (Meyrowitz, 1982).

Many studies involving children have examined the traits and behaviors of media characters that influence wishful identification. In a series of studies in the 1970s, Reeves and his colleagues examined how well several character attributes

predicted children's desire to be like or act like specific television characters, who were named by the researchers (e.g., Reeves & Greenberg, 1977; Reeves & Lometti, 1979; Reeves & Miller, 1978). Nearly 2 decades later, Hoffner (1996) examined the extent to which several character attributes predicted children's wishful identification with favorite characters. Each child named only one favorite character, but male and female characters were examined separately (although too few boys named female favorites to examine this subgroup). These studies, and others, are reviewed regarding the attributes of television characters that have emerged as important in wishful identification. Some of the attributes examined in this study—intelligence, success, attractiveness, humor—have been examined in prior research in this area and are characteristics that have been shown to be important in forming impressions of others. An additional behavioral characteristic, violence, was included due to the high level of concern about the impact of televised violence on society and the possible consequences of identification with violent characters (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Huesmann & Eron, 1986; Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003). Finally, one contextual factor—the admiration or respect of other characters—was included to explore the role of this variable in viewers' wishful identification.

Intelligence

Perceived intelligence is a characteristic that is commonly used when forming impressions of others. Intelligence is associated with many positive characteristics, such as problem-solving ability, social competence, and achievement (Paulhus, 2000; Sternberg, 2000). Reeves and Lometti (1979), however, found no evidence that being smart made characters appealing as role models. More recently, Hoffner (1996) found that perceived intelligence predicted children's wishful identification, but only with male characters. It is not clear whether these children aspired to be like intelligent male characters because they wished to have the same mental ability or whether they associated intelligence with other characteristics, such as achievement and success (which were not measured). Although intelligence is often linked to success (Sternberg, 2000), these two constructs are distinct, and intelligent individuals are not necessarily successful. On television, for example, Livingstone (1987, 1989) found that the perceived intelligence of soap opera characters was unrelated to the extent to which they were viewed as dominant and powerful within the narrative.

Success

Whereas intelligence is a personal trait, success involves the achievement of a desired goal or reward, often as the result of one's own actions. Much evidence shows that people strive to be like successful models (Bandura, 1986; Hoffner & Cantor,

1991). In several studies, children imitated or wanted to be like a successful character, even if the character's behaviors conflicted with the viewer's personal values (e.g., Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963; Liss, Reinhardt, & Fredriksen, 1983). Although Reeves and his colleagues did not measure characters' success, they found that indicators of characters' power—strength and activity—were associated with greater identification among boys but not girls (Miller & Reeves, 1976; Reeves & Greenberg, 1977). Television's portrayal of gender roles may be one explanation for the gender difference in these studies, as well as Hoffner's (1996) finding that intelligence predicted wishful identification with male characters only. Over the years, there has been concern about the more limited and less powerful portrayals of women on television. Despite positive changes in recent years, women are still depicted less often and in less powerful and prestigious roles than men (Elasmar, Hasegawa, & Brain, 1999; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999).

Attractiveness

Physical appearance has a strong influence on evaluations of and attraction to others (Langlois et al., 2000). The research by Reeves (Miller & Reeves, 1976; Reeves & Greenberg, 1977) and by Hoffner (1996) found that physical appearance was related to wishful identification, particularly for girls. In fact, Hoffner found that attractiveness was the *only* predictor of girls' wishful identification with female characters. This outcome may have been partially due to differences in the girls who selected female versus male favorites but may also reflect gender differences in television portrayals. Specifically, different traits tend to be emphasized or rewarded for males and females, with men rewarded more often for assertiveness and achievement and women rewarded more often for having an attractive, youthful appearance (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). Both male and female characters on television are generally better looking than the average person, but this is especially true for females, who are typically young, thin, and physically attractive (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Signorielli, 2001). This pattern of television portrayals may convey the message that, for females, appearance is of primary importance. Even young children's responses to characters are influenced by appearance stereotypes, and this effect is stronger for female characters (Hoffner & Cantor, 1985; Ramsey & Langlois, 2002).

Humor

Humor is an important attribute that viewers use to differentiate characters across television series (Reeves & Greenberg, 1977; Reeves & Lometti, 1979). Humor is generally considered an appealing personality trait in friends and romantic partners (e.g., Bippus, 2000) and even increases the likeability of a computer persona (Morkes, Nass, & Kernal, 1999). However, Reeves and Greenberg found that hu-

mor was not an important determinant of children's wishful identification with television characters. They attributed this outcome to the fact that the funny characters are typically unsupported by others (i.e., they are buffoons), whereas more serious characters receive support from their peers. In addition, Reeves and Lometti found that humor was negatively related to the attribute "smart." One of the key characteristics of humor is the disparagement and embarrassment of characters, with humorous characters often portrayed in a negative light (Zillmann, 2000). Hoffner (1996) also found no association between humor and identification with same-gender characters, although girls did identify with funny male characters.

Violence

Violence is common on television, and the majority of aggressors are male (Smith, Nathanson, & Wilson, 2002). Research shows that heavy viewers of televised violence are more likely to approve of violence as a way to solve conflicts, and more likely to behave aggressively (Donnerstein, Slaby, & Eron, 1994; Paik & Comstock, 1994). In addition, there is evidence that identification with aggressors increases the adverse effects of viewed violence (Huesmann & Eron, 1986; Huesmann et al., 2003). Hoffner (1996) found that characters' social behaviors (e.g., violent, helpful) did not predict wishful identification, once other attributes were accounted for. However, positive and negative behaviors were combined into a single scale. In addition, the study did not consider the extent to which characters were rewarded or punished for their behavior, for example through success/failure or feedback from other characters. Recent content analyses of television violence found that "good" characters (as opposed to villains) commit a high proportion of violent acts. A substantial number of these acts are rewarded within the context of the program, and punishment for violence is relatively rare (Smith et al., 2002; Wilson, Colvin, & Smith, 2002). In a study by Cohen (1999), adolescents identified both prosocial and antisocial traits as reasons for choosing favorite characters from a popular television serial. Meyer (1973) found that most children regarded favorite characters as behaving in socially desirable ways, but a certain subgroup (mostly males) identified strongly with violent characters. Similarly, Adams-Price and Greene (1990) found that adolescent boys identified more strongly with celebrities whom they perceived as more aggressive.

Admiration by Other Characters

Finally, as Reeves and Greenberg (1977) argued, feedback or support from other characters should also have an important influence on viewers' desire to be like media characters. Clearly characters are not evaluated in isolation but are considered within the context of their interactions with others in a program (Hoffner &

Cantor, 1991; Livingstone, 1987, 1989). How characters are treated by others—for example, the extent to which they are admired, respected, well liked—should serve as a cue regarding the worth or appeal of the characters or their behavior (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000). Specifically, the positive regard that characters receive from others can be interpreted as a form of reinforcement, which should influence viewers' desire to model characters' behaviors or attributes (Bandura, 1986).

THIS STUDY

The development of one's sense of personal identity continues into young adulthood, and it is important to study the role of the mass media in this process (Boon & Lomore, 2001). However, a literature search uncovered no prior studies with adults that explicitly examined how character attributes are related to identification with media characters. This study was designed to address this topic among young adults, as well as to examine the role of perceived similarity in identification. Most previous studies of the influence of character attributes on identification did not consider the gender of the character. As discussed earlier, Hoffner (1996) recently found that the predictors of children's wishful identification differed for male and female characters. However, because each respondent evaluated only one character, the results could partially reflect differences in the children who chose female rather than male favorites. In this study, all respondents reported on fictional characters of both genders. They rated their perceived similarity to each character, evaluated the character on several attributes, and rated their wishful identification with the character.

First, this study examined differences in men's and women's perceptions of their favorite male and female characters in terms of character attributes and perceived similarity. For example, these analyses addressed whether men and women perceive their favorite characters as reflecting gender role stereotypes that still exist on television (Elasmar et al., 1999; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999) and whether the character's gender plays a role in perceived similarity (v. Feilitzen & Linne, 1975; Reeves & Miller, 1978). This type of descriptive information can aid in understanding the factors that contribute to wishful identification. Based on the preceding review, these research questions and hypothesis were posed:

RQ1: How will the perceived character attributes be correlated in the four subgroups?

H1: Respondents will report greater perceived similarity with characters of the same gender than with characters of the other gender.

RQ2: Will male characters differ from female characters in their perceived attributes, and will these perceptions differ for men and women?

This study focused on the factors that contribute to young adults' wishful identification with television characters. As discussed, research suggests that perceived similarity is associated with greater wishful identification (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). There is considerable evidence that children are more likely to identify with same-gender characters, but the effect tends to be stronger for males (Hoffner, 1996; Miller & Reeves, 1976). This seems likely to occur among young adults as well, because male characters are still portrayed in more varied and prestigious roles, and because it is more common for women than men to engage in activities typically associated with the other gender (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). Evidence suggests that perceived similarity in personal characteristics also contributes to wishful identification (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Murray, 1999). Thus, we proposed the following:

H2a: Respondents will report greater wishful identification with characters of the same gender than with characters of the other gender.
H2b: The difference between same- and other-gender characters will be larger for men than for women.
H3: Perceived similarity will be a positive predictor of wishful identification.

This study also explored the ways in which character attributes contribute to wishful identification. The preceding review suggests some possible predictions regarding how the various character attributes will be related to wishful identification, but nearly all prior research involved children (e.g., Hoffner, 1996; Reeves & Greenberg, 1977). Adults may focus on and be attracted by attributes different from those found to be important for children. Due to the lack of research on adults' identification with television characters generally, and with male and female characters specifically, a research question was proposed:

RQ3: Which perceived character traits will predict wishful identification with male and female characters, and will these differ for men and women?

Finally, there is evidence that program genre affects the ways viewers select, respond to, and are influenced by the television characters and content they view (e.g., Busselle & Crandall, 2002; Cohen & Weimann, 2000; Hawkins et al., 2001; Turner, 1993). Programs within particular genres tend to follow similar conventions (Feuer, 1987). However, very little research has examined genre differences in viewers' attachments to television characters. In one study, Turner (1993) found differences in viewers' parasocial relationships with three types of performers: soap opera characters, newscasters, and comedians. He argued that future research on viewers' involvement with characters should examine differences based on character type. The major genre difference that is likely to emerge in a study of fic-

tional television characters is between situation comedies and dramatic programs. In broad terms, these two types of programs may differ not only in the use of humor, but also in the kinds of situations and interactions likely to foster involvement with the characters. For example, characters on situation comedies are often subjected to embarrassment or ridicule (e.g., Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Medoff, 1982), which potentially might affect characters' appeal as role models. Given the lack of prior research on this issue, we asked the following:

RQ4: Will wishful identification differ for characters on situation comedies versus dramas?

METHOD

Respondents and Procedure

A total of 208 young adults (78 men, 130 women) who were enrolled in general education classes at a large university in the midwestern United States completed anonymous questionnaires during class time. The average age of the respondents was 20.11 years (*SD* = 1.68, range = 18–28 years). Of the total sample, 84.6% identified themselves as White/Caucasian, 11.5% as Black/African American, 1.9% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.0% as Hispanic /Latino(a), and 1.0% declined to identify their race/ethnicity. On average, respondents reported viewing 3.6 hr of television per day (*SD* = 1.93).

Primary Measures

Respondents named their favorite male and female fictional television characters (the order was varied on the questionnaire), and subsequent questions dealt with these characters. Respondents reported the race and age of each character and estimated the length of time they had viewed their favorite character's program on a scale from 1 (*less than a year*) to 5 (*more than 4 years*). They then rated their responses to and perceptions of the characters on a variety of scales.[1]

Wishful identification. Five items measured respondents' desire to be like or act like their favorite characters (Hoffner, 1996).[2] Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The ratings for the individual items were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater *wishful identification* (αs = .80 for male characters, .84 for female characters).

Perceived similarity. Perceived similarity to each character was measured on the *attitude similarity* subscale of the Perceived Homophily Measure (McCroskey, Richmond, & Daly, 1975).[3] This scale uses semantic differential items that range from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating greater perceived attitude similarity (αs = .79 for male characters, .81 for female characters).[4]

Character attributes. Respondents rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that a series of items described their favorite characters, using a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The items were presented in one random order and were chosen to measure seven attributes: smart (smart, intelligent, stupid), successful (successful, achieves goals, gets what he/she wants), attractive (physically attractive, ugly, good-looking), funny (funny, humorous, makes me laugh), respected (respected by others, receives approval, criticized by others), popular (has lots of friends, well liked, gets support from others), and violent (does violent things, physically hurts people, physically aggressive). Items that reflected the opposite of the attribute being measured were reverse coded.

For male and female characters separately, the 21 attribute items were subjected to principal axis factor analysis with oblique rotation. The two analyses yielded similar patterns. For three of the attributes (attractive, violent, funny), the expected items loaded on unique factors for both male and female characters. The items for "smart" and "successful" loaded together in the analysis for male characters, but on separate factors for female characters. To maintain consistency and to explore possible differences between the two attributes, they were used separately. The items for "popular" and "respected" loaded together in both analyses, so these items were combined to form a single scale for characters of each gender. Because all of these items reflected favorable evaluative responses from other characters (after reverse coding), this scale was labeled "admired." Thus, six scales were created by averaging the relevant items: *smart* (αs = .84 for male characters, .82 for female characters), *successful* (αs = .78, .73), *attractive* (αs = .93, .83), *funny* (αs = .93, .94), *admired* (αs = .86, .81), and *violent* (αs = .80, .63).

RESULTS

Choice of Favorite Characters

Respondents named 75 different male characters and 65 different female characters.[5] Characters were classified as appearing on a situation comedy, a drama, a soap opera, or other (e.g., cartoon, variety program). The distribution of program types was nearly identical for male and female characters. For male characters, the

distribution was 57.2% situation comedy, 31.7% drama, 10.1% soap opera, 1.0% other. For female characters, the distribution was 57.2% situation comedy, 26.9% drama, 14.4% soap opera, and 1.4% other. In later analyses that included character type, this variable was coded as either comedy or drama (including both dramas and soap operas); the few characters classified as "other" were excluded. The length of time viewers had watched their favorite characters fell between *2–3 years* (3) and *3–4 years* (4) (male characters, $M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.23$; female characters, $M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.32$).

Overall, most respondents chose favorite characters of their own race. However, choice of a same-race character was much higher among White participants ($n = 176$) than among Black participants ($n = 24$), for both male favorites (Whites, 97.7%; Blacks, 66.7%), $\chi^2(1) = 30.83$, $p < .001$, and female favorites (Whites, 99.4%, Blacks, 54.2%), $\chi^2(1) = 68.91$, $p < .001$. None of the six respondents of other races selected a same-race favorite character, undoubtedly due to the lack of available choices (Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002).

On average, male characters were 9.45 years older than respondents ($SD = 7.54$), and female characters were 8.15 years older ($SD = 6.77$). In fact, nearly 90% of favorite characters of both genders were older than respondents (male characters, 87.0%; female characters, 85.6%), with a very small percentage identified as exactly the same age (male characters, 7.7%; female characters, 9.1%) or younger (5.3% for characters of both genders). However, about one third of the characters were within 5 years of the respondent's own age (male characters, 29.5%; female characters, 40.4%).

Correlations Among Perceived Character Attributes

To address RQ1, correlations were computed among the six attributes for men's and women's perceptions of male and female characters separately. Table 1 shows that, in general, intelligence, success, attractiveness, and admiration were positively correlated. Exceptions to this pattern occurred in only one subgroup. For men rating female characters, intelligence was unrelated to attractiveness, and neither intelligence nor success was correlated with admiration. Table 1 also shows that, in most cases, humor was associated with less intelligence but more admiration and was unrelated to success or attractiveness. There were exceptions to this pattern for male characters, however. Men did not perceive funny male characters as more admired. Women did not perceive funny male characters as less intelligent but did view them as less attractive—and more successful. Finally, violence was negatively correlated with admiration and humor and, in most cases, was either negatively correlated or uncorrelated with intelligence and success. However, among men, female characters' violence was associated with *greater* intelligence and success.

TABLE 1
Zero-Order Correlations Between Perceived Character Attributes of Male and Female Characters, Among Men and Women

	Smart	*Successful*	*Attractive*	*Funny*	*Violent*	*Admired*
Men's perceptions						
Smart	—	.54***	.51***	–.24*	–.23*	.42***
Successful	.38***	—	.46***	–.07	–.10	.38***
Attractive	.08	.27*	—	–.15	–.13	.62***
Funny	–.21+	–.07	.03	—	–.47***	.08
Violent	.20+	.23*	–.08	–.12	—	–.22*
Admired	.16	.12	.32**	.26*	–.19+	—
Women's perceptions						
Smart	—	.67***	.43***	.02	–.04	.54***
Successful	.54***	—	.27**	.19*	–.01	.50***
Attractive	.23**	.22**	—	–.18*	–.04	.32***
Funny	–.27**	–.13	–.22**	—	–.32***	.25**
Violent	–.01	–.22*	–.16+	–.08	—	–.26**
Admired	.31***	.15+	.26**	.28***	–.41***	—

Note. Correlations for male characters are above the diagonal, and correlations for female characters are below the diagonal.

+$p \leq .10$. *$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$.

Differences in the Variables Associated With Gender of Respondent and Gender of Character

Ratings of the characters on all eight variables (attitude similarity, the six attributes, wishful identification) were submitted to eight separate 2 × 2 mixed analyses of variance (ANOVAs), with respondent gender as the between-subjects factor, and character gender as the within-subjects factor. These results appear in Table 2.

H1 predicted greater perceived similarity with same-gender characters. This hypothesis was supported, with a significant interaction between respondent gender and character gender, $F(1, 206) = 31.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .13$. Table 2 shows that both men and women reported greater attitude similarity with characters of the same gender than with characters of the other gender.

Regarding RQ2, differences related to the characters' gender emerged on three attributes. For success, main effects emerged for both character gender, $F(1, 206) = 4.13$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$, and respondent gender, $F(1, 206) = 12.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$, with success rated higher for female characters ($M = 3.97$) than for male characters ($M = 3.86$), and higher by women ($M = 4.07$) than by men ($M = 3.77$). For attractiveness, two main effects were qualified by an interaction, $F(1, 206) = 44.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$. Table 2 shows that men perceived female characters as more attractive than male characters, but women perceived male and female characters as

TABLE 2
Means and Standard Deviations for All Variables as a Function of Respondent Gender and Character Gender

	Men				*Women*						
	Male Characters		*Female Characters*		*Male Characters*		*Female Characters*		*Effects*		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*RG*	*CG*	*RG × CG*
Attitude similarity	$4.16_{b,c}$	1.33	3.35_{a}	1.06	3.78_{b}	1.20	4.41_{c}	1.09	*ns*	*ns*	***
Perceived attributes											
Smart	3.52	1.02	3.53	0.86	4.04	1.01	4.04	0.80	***	*ns*	*ns*
Successful	3.72	0.80	3.82	0.69	4.01	0.70	4.13	0.65	***	*	*ns*
Attractive	3.21_{a}	1.03	4.33_{b}	0.90	4.31_{b}	0.99	4.31_{b}	0.71	***	***	***
Funny	4.48	0.67	4.20	0.76	4.42	0.79	4.04	0.97	*ns*	***	*ns*
Violent	2.60	1.03	2.58	1.01	2.31	0.85	2.18	0.74	***	*ns*	*ns*
Admired	3.79	0.72	3.80	0.72	3.98	0.67	4.01	0.67	**	*ns*	*ns*
Wishful identification	$3.35_{b,c}$	0.73	2.84_{a}	0.76	3.20_{b}	0.74	3.55_{c}	0.78	***	*ns*	***

Note. Scores on the similarity scales could range from 1 to 7. Scores for the character attributes and wishful identification could range from 1 to 5. Means for each variable that have no subscripts in common differ at $p < .05$ by the Scheffé method. The last three columns of the table report the significance of the main effects and interactions for the 2 × 2 (Respondent Gender × Character Gender) mixed analysis of variance for each variable. RG = Respondent Gender; CG = Character Gender; RG × CG = Respondent Gender by Character Gender interaction.

*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$. *ns* = not significant ($p > .10$).

equally attractive. Finally, male characters were rated as funnier ($M = 4.45$) than female characters ($M = 4.12$), $F(1, 206) = 24.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$.

Differences associated only with the respondent's gender emerged for the other three attributes. Compared to men, women perceived their favorite characters as more intelligent (men, $M = 3.53$, women, $M = 4.04$), $F(1, 206) = 26.14$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$, and more admired (men, $M = 3.80$, women, $M = 4.00$), $F(1, 206) = 6.45$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .03$. In contrast, men viewed their favorite characters as more violent ($M = 2.59$) than did women ($M = 2.25$), $F(1, 206) = 11.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$.

H2a, which predicted greater wishful identification with same-gender characters, was supported. A main effect of respondent gender was qualified by an interaction between respondent gender and character gender, $F(1, 206) = 51.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .20$. As predicted, the mean comparisons in Table 2 show that, for both men and women, wishful identification was higher for characters of the same gender than those of the other gender. However, H2b was not supported. Although the difference between same- and other-gender characters was slightly larger for men

(*M* difference = .49) than for women (*M* difference = .35), these scores were not significantly different.[6]

Regression Analyses Predicting Wishful Identification

For men and women separately, hierarchical regression analyses examined the predictors of wishful identification with male and female characters. Character type (comedy, drama) was entered in the first step of the equation to control for differences in character selection before examining the contribution of the other variables. Attitude similarity was entered in the second step, and the six character attributes were entered in the third step. Although attitude similarity and character attributes are generally regarded as contributing separately to wishful identification, a fundamental sense of similarity may be an important motivator in deciding to become like a character in other ways. Perceived attitudinal similarity may also lead people to view a character as having more positive traits. Thus, the analysis examines the contribution of character attributes after controlling for attitude similarity—but the contribution of attitude similarity after entering the character attributes will also be reported. Examination of tolerances showed that multicollinearity was not a problem in any of the regression equations. Table 3 summarizes the regression results.

H3, regarding the link between perceived similarity and wishful identification, was supported.[7] As expected, attitude similarity was a strong positive predictor of wishful identification for both men and women and with characters of both genders. The more attitudinally similar a character was perceived to be, the more respondents wanted to be like him or her. After the contribution of the character attributes was accounted for, this relationship was reduced but remained strong in all analyses: men/male characters, $\beta = .36$, $p < .001$; men/female characters, $\beta = .38$, $p < .001$; women/male characters, $\beta = .20$, $p = .01$; women/female characters, $\beta = .36$, $p < .001$.

RQ3 addressed the attributes that predict wishful identification. Both men and women reported greater wishful identification with characters of the other gender who were perceived as more successful and more admired by other characters. However, the predictors of wishful identification with same-gender characters were somewhat different for men and women. Men identified more strongly with male characters whom they perceived as smarter, more successful, and more violent. Women identified more strongly with female characters whom they perceived as smarter, more successful, more admired by other characters, and more physically attractive.

RQ4 addressed differences in wishful identification based on character type. Men identified more strongly with male characters who appeared on drama series, rather than comedy series. Character type was unrelated to wishful identification in the three other subgroups.

TABLE 3
Regression Analyses Predicting Wishful Identification

	Men				*Women*			
	Male Characters[a]		*Female Characters*[b]		*Male Characters*[c]		*Female*[d] *Characters*	
	Beta	R^2 *Change*	*Beta*	R^2 *Change*	*Beta*	R^2 *Change*	*Beta*	R^2 *Change*
1. Character type	.25*	.06*	.08	.01	.06	.00	.09	.01
2. Attitude similarity	.57***	.33***	.40***	.16**	.41***	.17**	.49***	.23***
3. Perceived attributes		.24***		.21**		.23***		.26***
Smart	.31**		–.06		.08		.19*	
Successful	.23*		.30**		.27**		.16*	
Attractive	.09		–.13		.08		.15*	
Funny	.11		–.07		–.06		.12	
Violent	.28**		.00		–.03		.07	
Admired	.14		.41***		.25**		.26**	

Note. Character type was coded comedy (0), drama (1). Betas in the table are betas at entry.

[a]Adjusted $R^2 = .58$; $F(8, 68) = 14.32$, $p < .001$. [b]Adjusted $R^2 = .30$; $F(8, 66) = 5.03$, $p < .001$. [c]Adjusted $R^2 = .36$; $F(8, 120) = 10.09$, $p < .001$. [d]Adjusted $R^2 = .46$; $F(8, 121) = 14.93$, $p < .001$.

*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed some very interesting findings regarding the factors that affect young adults' wishful identification with favorite television characters. Like children and adolescents, these respondents identified more strongly with characters whom they regarded as similar to themselves (e.g., Hoffner, 1996; McDonald & Kim, 2001; Miller & Reeves, 1976). Specifically, respondents reported higher levels of wishful identification with characters of the same gender, and with characters whom they perceived as sharing their own attitudes. The fact that respondents felt more similar in attitudes to same-gender characters suggests that identification with characters of the same gender may be partially a function of perceived attitude similarity. There is no way to tell whether the observed link between attitude similarity and wishful identification is causal, with similarity leading to identification. On average, respondents had viewed their favorite characters for approximately 3 years. It is possible that, over time, viewers come to believe they have incorporated qualities of their favorite characters into their own self-concepts, and thus share a greater degree of similarity (Duck & Barnes, 1992). Similarity in other demographic variables (race and age) did not appear to play a role in wishful identification in this study. The small percentage of non-White participants limited this study's ability to assess how similarity in race affects identification.

Both men and women identified more strongly with successful and admired characters of the other gender. However, men and women differed in the attributes that predicted their wishful identification with same-gender characters. Specifically, men identified with male characters whom they perceived as successful, intelligent, and violent, whereas women identified with female characters whom they perceived as successful, intelligent, attractive, and admired. It is noteworthy that the character's success was the only attribute that predicted wishful identification in all four subgroups. In addition, perceived admiration was associated with higher levels of wishful identification in all cases except men rating male characters. Both of these attributes (success, admiration) can be considered forms of reinforcement that occur within the context of the narrative, rather than traits that exist within individuals. People of all ages strive to be successful, and much research shows that observing others receive rewards enhances their appeal as role models (Bandura, 1986). The findings for success in this study are consistent with prior research involving children (e.g., Liss et al., 1983). Interestingly, female characters were perceived as more successful than male characters, although the difference was small. This does not reflect the pattern of portrayals on television (e.g., Signorielli & Bacue, 1999) but may indicate that success affects the choice of favorite female characters more than the choice of favorite male characters.

The findings for admiration suggest that the interactions among the characters in a program have an influence on viewers' attraction to characters as role models (Livingstone, 1987, 1989; Reeves & Greenberg, 1977). However, admiration did

not affect men's wishful identification with male characters. Perhaps men see affinity and support from others as something more important for women than for men. In fact, violence seems to have replaced admiration as an attribute that men found appealing in male characters.

Among both men and women, intelligence was associated with greater wishful identification with same-gender characters, but not characters of the other gender. Although both intelligence and success could be considered indicators of competence, intelligence is a personal trait, whereas success occurs as a result of interacting with others and the environment. Apparently young adults are more comfortable aspiring to share the personal characteristics of same-gender individuals, but they want to achieve the same goals and rewards as characters of both genders. These results contrast with Hoffner's (1996) finding that intelligence predicted children's wishful identification with male characters only.

Consistent with Hoffner's (1996) finding that attractiveness was the only predictor of girls' wishful identification with female favorites, this study found that attractiveness was associated with wishful identification only among women rating female characters. However, several other attributes also predicted women's wishful identification with female characters. Hoffner argued that the importance of female attractiveness in her study might have been due partially to characteristics of the girls, with female favorites named more often by girls with more traditional gender-role conceptions. This was not the case in this study, however, because all respondents named characters of both genders. Rather, this result probably reflects the influence of both society and the media. In general, appearance is considered more important for women than for men in society, and women are more likely to consciously model their own appearance after media characters (Beneke, 1997). On television, women are typically thin and attractive, and tend to be younger than men (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Signorielli, 2001). The finding that young women identify more strongly with attractive female characters is cause for concern, in light of growing evidence that exposure to media portrayals (especially thin, attractive women) is related to more body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, particularly among girls and young women (e.g., Harrison, 1997, 2000).

Interestingly, there was also a gender difference in the perceived attractiveness of the characters. Men perceived female characters as more attractive than male characters, but women perceived male and female characters as equally attractive. It could be argued that this finding is reflective of a popular culture that places greater emphasis on female attractiveness than male attractiveness, but that would not explain the findings for women. Rather, the results may partially reflect young adults' tendency to consider romantic attraction (and thus, physical appearance) when responding to characters of the other gender (Cohen, 1999). Although appearance is important in romantic attraction for both genders, women show a greater willingness to assess same-gender attractiveness (Beneke, 1997).

As other studies have found (e.g., Reeves & Greenberg, 1977), humor did not enhance wishful identification. Although humor is important in interpersonal attraction (e.g., Bippus, 2000), many other attributes were more important in young adults' wishful identification with television characters. One explanation may be a difference between the characteristics people look for in friends and romantic partners, and those they want to emulate themselves. In other words, although people are attracted to others who have a sense of humor, this may not be the kind of trait that people think of developing in themselves. In addition, in this study, funny characters were generally seen as more admired by others, but they generally were not judged to possess other positive traits. In fact, funnier characters were typically perceived as less intelligent (consistent with Reeves & Lometti, 1979) and were seen as less attractive by women respondents.

Men reported greater wishful identification with more violent male characters. This outcome suggests that young men, as well as boys, find violent characters to be worthy role models (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Meyer, 1973). Studies show that males commit the majority of violent acts on television, and research has documented the appeal of violence, especially to males (Goldstein, 1998; Smith et al., 2002). However, violence per se may not be what men in this study found appealing. Although men perceived violent male characters as less intelligent and less admired, these characters may also have more exciting or glamorous occupations, or receive other rewards that were not measured in this study. It should be noted that male and female characters did not differ in their perceived violence, and were rated as relatively nonviolent (mean scores below the midpoint).

Much of the research on children's wishful identification with television characters was done more than 20 years ago. Many changes have occurred in society and in television portrayals since that time (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). However, as already noted, there were still some striking differences between this study and the relatively recent investigation by Hoffner (1996). First, as already noted, the fact that children were asked to choose only one favorite character in the earlier study may mean that the results partially reflected differences in the children who chose male versus female favorite characters. In this study, respondents rated favorite characters of both genders. Another obvious difference between the two studies is the age of the participants. There is evidence that the characteristics children attend to and use in forming impressions change with age (Hoffner & Cantor, 1985, 1991). In addition, there may be differences in the nature of the characters who populate programs designed to appeal to children versus young adults. For example, the characters regarded as favorites by children and young adults may differ in terms of the characteristics that are valued and rewarded within the programs. Finally, this study measured two attributes, success and admiration, that were not considered in the earlier study by Hoffner. Accounting for the influence of those attributes may have changed the pattern of results.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

These results contribute to our understanding of the factors that make television characters appealing as role models to young adults. Examining favorite characters is a common method of investigating audience reactions to media portrayals (e.g., Cohen, 1997; Hoffner, 1996; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Turner, 1993) and responses to favorite characters are informative because of their significance for viewers. According to the "drench hypothesis" (Greenberg, 1988), even one salient role model who exhibits appealing traits can have a strong impact on audience members who are drawn to that character. Thus, recurring characters have enormous potential to affect the attitudes, values, and behaviors of the audience (Brown & Cody, 1991; Papa et al., 2000).

Some limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, it is unclear what criteria people use to select favorite characters, and any differences between men and women—or between characters on comedies versus dramas—may be due partly to differences in how characters were chosen. Clearly the attributes that are important in character development vary across different television programs and genres (e.g., Cohen & Weimann, 2000; Livingstone, 1989). In addition, limiting the study to favorite characters may have restricted the range of the variables examined, because people generally have relatively positive evaluations of favorite characters. Future studies could address these issues by focusing on a specific set of characters, for example those from a television series with a large, diverse cast such as *ER* (cf. Cohen, 1999). It should also be noted that this study examined the *desire* to be like favorite characters but did not assess respondents' actual efforts at self-transformation. Future research should include such measures (cf. Boon & Lomore, 2001).

This study involved a sample of predominantly White young adults enrolled in a university in the midwestern United States. The relatively homogeneous sample made it impossible to examine the role of most demographic characteristics in the process of wishful identification. Future research should recruit participants from more diverse backgrounds, particularly people of different ethnicities and a wider age range. Moreover, the factors affecting wishful identification may be different in other cultures or geographical regions. For example, the cultural context may affect the types of attributes that make characters appealing as role models to men and women. Although research on responses to media characters has been conducted in many countries besides the United States (e.g., Cohen, 1999; Papa et al., 2000), little research makes cross-cultural comparisons (cf. Huesmann & Eron, 1986). Furthermore, even within a culture there are individual differences in how people respond to media messages (Oliver, 2002). Future research should explore the extent to which personal characteristics, such as gender-role typing or self-esteem, play a role in viewers' wishful identification.

This study provided insight into the process of wishful identification, but some questions remain. For example, through what mechanism does a sense of similarity facilitate a desire to become *more* similar to a media figure? Although it has been suggested that similarity indicates that it is both possible and appropriate to become like another person (Bandura, 1969), there is little evidence for this explanation in a mediated context. In addition, if similarity motivates wishful identification, then why do people aspire to be like others whom they regard as substantially *different*—in particular, those who have more positive attributes or greater achievements? It was argued earlier that the characteristics that most affect perceived similarity—relatively stable factors like demographics, personality traits, or life experiences—are probably different from those that directly motivate wishful identification. However, this issue needs to be explored further.

Based on accumulated evidence (see Boon & Lomore, 2001; Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003; Cohen, 2001; Giles, 2002; Hawkins et al., 2001; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Rubin & Rubin, 2001), researchers should endeavor to construct a comprehensive model of the development and consequences of relationships with media figures. Such a model needs to consider (a) personal and social characteristics of audience members; (b) the selectivity of the audience, regarding media exposure and the focusing of attention on particular media figures; (c) the process of impression formation in relation to how media figures are portrayed (e.g., personal attributes, interactions with others); (d) the concurrent evaluation of media figures in relation to the self (e.g., perceived similarity, social comparison processes); (e) the formation of emotional bonds or parasocial relationships; and (f) the influence of these bonds on responses to media figures, both during exposure (e.g., absorption in a narrative, affective responses) and after exposure (e.g., wishful identification, efforts to emulate a media figure). Many studies—including the present one—have examined components of this process, but only a few studies (e.g., Boon & Lomore, 2001; Brown et al., 2003) have attempted to model the process in some detail. Researchers need to include more components of the process within a single research project and they need to work on clarifying the conceptual and operational definitions of key variables. For example, several scholars have noted difficulty in developing measures that clearly differentiate between parasocial attachment and wishful identification (Brown et al., 2003; Eyal & Rubin, 2003). Finally, longitudinal data are required to determine the causal direction of the associations among variables. This type of evidence could be obtained by tracing the development of relationships with media figures over time.

Further research on mediated relationships can help develop the conceptual linkages between mass communication and interpersonal communication (Cohen & Metzger, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 2001). Relationships form in all contexts in which people encounter others—whether through face-to-face interaction, mediated interaction (e.g., Internet chat rooms), or primarily noninteractive contexts (e.g., televised narratives). The continued study of relationships with media figures

can also contribute to theorizing about media effects (Eveland, 2003), by emphasizing the unique connection between audience members and media figures rather than focusing primarily on media content.

NOTES

[1]Other results from the same data set are reported elsewhere (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2000).

[2]The wishful identification scale included three items from Hoffner (1996)—Items a, b, and d following—and two additional items. Principal axis factor analyses revealed that the scale was unidimensional for both male and female characters (percent of variance accounted for: male characters, 45.5%, female characters, 53.7%). The items were (with factor loadings for male and female characters in parentheses) as follows: (a) He/she is the sort of person I want to be like myself (.75, .91), (b) Sometimes I wish I could be more like him/her (.77, .75), (c) He/she is someone I would like to emulate (.69, .78), (d) I'd like to do the kinds of things he/she does on the show (.62, .67), and (e) I would NEVER want to act the way he/she does on the show (52, .50; reverse coded). These five items were randomly distributed throughout a list of more than 25 statements about the characters.

[3]The attitude items measured how much the other person "thinks like me," "behaves like me," "is like me," and "is similar to me." Respondents also completed the *background similarity* subscale of the Perceived Homophily Measure (McCroskey et al., 1975), which measures the extent to which the other person is from a similar social class, has a similar economic situation, has a similar status, and is from a similar background. This subscale had low reliability (αs = .56 and .55, for male and female characters, respectively), which could not be improved by deleting items. Thus, this subscale was excluded from further analysis. However, in preliminary analyses involving both similarity subscales, background similarity was not a significant predictor in any regression equations.

[4]For male and female characters separately, the wishful identification items and attitude similarity items were entered in a principal axis factor analysis with oblique rotation. In both analyses, two factors emerged, and *all* items loaded on the intended factors. For male characters, all factor loadings exceeded .43, with no cross-loadings over .22. For female characters, all factor loadings exceeded .42, with no cross-loadings over .18, with two exceptions on the similarity factor ("is like me": factor loading .56, cross-loading .31; "thinks like me": factor loading .43, cross-loading .37). It should be noted that the different measurement scales used for the two sets of items has no impact on factor analysis results, and indeed analyses using standardized variables produced identical results.

[5]The television program that accounted for the largest proportion of both male and female favorite characters was *Friends*, with 20.2% of male characters and 28.6% of female characters from this show. Other programs mentioned frequently were *Seinfeld* (9.5% of males, 5.2% of females), *ER* (8.0% of males, 4.3% of females), and *Days of Our Lives* (4.7% of males, 5.6% of females). Relatively few characters appeared on television series traditionally considered violent, such as *Walker, Texas Ranger*; *Xena, Warrior Princess*; or *The X-Files* (7.0% of males, 2.8% of females).

[6]This comparison was directly tested by recoding the wishful identification scores into identification with same-gender and other-gender characters (rather than male and female characters), and conducting another 2 × 2 mixed ANOVA. In this analysis, the interaction between respondent gender and same- versus other-gender character was not significant.

[7]To examine the effect of similarity in race and age, these variables were coded as 1 (*the same*) or 0 (*different*; same age = within 5 years) and entered into regression analyses before perceived similarity. Neither variable was a significant predictor. The character's age was also a nonsignificant predictor when coded as the age difference between the respondent and the character, or the absolute value of the difference (all betas near zero). Separate analyses involving only Black participants revealed no effect

of the character's race on wishful identification. Given the relatively small sample size and the number of other factors, race and age were excluded from further analyses.

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