EXPLICATING PARA-SOCIAL INTERACTION: HOW PARA-SOCIAL INTERACTION INTERACT WITH IDENTIFICATION, SIMILARITY, AFFINITY/LIKING, AND IMITATION

by

BIN SHEN

A THESIS

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This study examined associations between para-social interaction and the four other interactive phenomena in the media: identification, similarity, affinity/liking, and imitation. The results of a survey of 150 undergraduate students showed that para-social interaction did have high positive associations with identification, affinity/liking, similarity, and imitation. Furthermore, the correlations between para-social interaction and identification and affinity/liking were relatively higher than those between para-social interaction and similarity/imitation. With regard to the impact of participant’s age, no significant correlation was found. As for the gender’s influence, no significant difference was found in identification, similarity, and imitation. However, female participants had stronger para-social interaction and affinity/liking than male participants. Exposure levels were also examined. While general frequency of exposure was a significant predictor for both para-social interaction and imitation, frequency of exposure to favorite media characters and media programs was only significant with imitation. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and other various psychological theories were applied to explain these findings. In addition, a model of para-social interaction was designed for better understanding and more effective application of this phenomenon.
DEDICATION

This thesis is particularly dedicated to Dr. Shuhua Zhou and my family who guided me, helped me, stood by me and supported me throughout the time taken to complete this work.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

α  Cronbach’s index of internal consistency

df  Degrees of freedom: number of values free to vary after certain restrictions have been placed on the data

F  Fisher’s F ratio: A ration of two variances

M  Mean: the sum of a set of measurements divided by the number of measurements in the set

n  Number of participants

SD  Standard deviation: a measure of the variability or dispersion of a population

p  Probability associated with the occurrence under the null hypothesis of a value as extreme as or more extreme than the observed value

r  Pearson product-moment correlation

$t$  Computed value of $t$ test

<  Less than

>  More than

=  Equal to
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

During the process of media consumption, different kinds of phenomena regarding the relationship between media characters and media users might occur. This relationship deserves and has gained much investigation in the last few decades. Based on relevant documented research since the 1950s, investigations about the interactive situations in media have primarily focused on five dimensions: the characters and their characteristics in the relationship, such as what specific characteristics of people are depicted and emphasized to govern selective news exposure of news consumers (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006); the form, process, or pattern of the relationship, such as why TV viewers would write letters to criticize the content of a TV soap opera and give advice about what should be addressed in the following episodes (Sood & Rogers, 2000); reasons for and elements of the formation, development, and expansion of this relationship, such as why audience members would donate a large amount of money to a persona in a TV soap opera (Wang & Singhal, 1992); ways to distinguish this relationship from other phenomena which resemble it, such as whether there exists any similar but essentially different phenomenon that is hard to distinguish (Cohen, 2001); and its effects, such as how this relationship develops to celebrity worship and harassment (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2008).

What exactly is this widely concerning relationship? Horton and Wohl (1956) first coined the term para-social interaction to describe the “seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer” (p.215). Simply put, the giving and taking between media characters, including news anchors, presenters, announcers, performers, celebrities and some other show-
business people appearing on the media, and media users is an imaginary conversational process (Horton & Wohl, 1956). By directly addressing the viewers, media characters will develop an illusory social interaction, a model similar to the way friends communicate with each other (Auter, 1992). Rooted in interpersonal communication, para-social interaction is distinguished from an actual face-to-face interpersonal relationship since it is “one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p.215).

The initiation of para-social interaction was largely influenced by the conception of pseudo-gemeinschaft. Originating from mass persuasion, pseudo-gemeinschaft, literally false community, is false care from a person with the purpose of more effective manipulation toward another persona, which later develops into a fake friendship (Merton, Fiske, & Curtis, 1946). On the basis of the analysis on an 18-hour marathon radio program on CBS, pseudo-gemeinschaft related to celebrities’ impact on audience in this case was explored (Merton, Fiske, & Curtis, 1946). Ten years later, the concept of para-social interaction, “intimacy at a distance” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p.251), was developed. In addition, this interaction could be enhanced by media figures’ conversational styles (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985), certain camera angles or special technology (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Meyrowitz, 1982; Nordlund, 1978), frequency of exposure to the same media characters or programs (Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005; Levy, 1979; Perse & Rubin, 1989), and audiences’ goal-oriented social interaction demands (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985).

In this study, a continuum model consisting of three dimensions will be proposed for a more in-depth analysis and application of para-social interaction. In addition, correlations between para-social interaction and other types of media interactive phenomena will be
examined for more systematic and explicit conceptualizations and operationalizations of these media involvements. Another contribution of this study is the application of various psychological theories in relevant analyses.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Distinctions from Other Concepts

Although para-social interaction could be used to analyze many interactive situations in media, and could be controlled (promoted or diminished) by manipulating various elements, it exemplifies just one of the diversified manners in which media users’ react to media programs and media characters. It is different from social interaction, identification, wishful identification, similarity, liking, affinity, imagination, and imitation.

Social interaction. The definition of para-social interaction, a “seeming face-to-face relationship,” already proves that individuals will have the same or very similar cognitive process in social interaction or mediated communication (Bargh, 1988), since media users will react to media characters “as if” it occupies (their) physical space, thereby becoming incorporated into (their) social network” (Giles, 2002, p.284). In other words, an individual’s cognition toward another individual in a real social circumstance is fundamentally the same as that toward an attached and intimate media figure at distance. That is also why some researchers use components or theories in social interaction to test para-social interaction. A good example is a study done by Perse and Rubin (1989) which investigates both social and para-social interaction from the same perspective. In this study, the independent variables (length of acquaintance and cognitive complexity levels) are tested in both interaction processes, and a direct comparison between the two complexities is hypothesized and tested. The results of that research demonstrate that “length of acquaintance will be related positively to attributional
confidence” in both social and para-social relationships (Perse & Rubin, 1989, p.63), and further, social and para-social complexity do have positive relationships. As is said by the authors, this research highlights “the utility of applying interpersonal frameworks to media contexts” (p.73).

Despite the fact that a lot of research has been conducted to demonstrate the advantages in merging the two types of interactions (Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Turner, 1993), there are still differences between them. On one hand, interactions usually happen among acquaintances or friends in a social context, rather than pseudo-acquaintances, or strangers (in a normal situation) in a mediated social complex. On the other hand, immediate feedback exists in a face-to-face interaction, but does not exist in para-social interaction (Perse & Rubin, 1989). It is true that fans might try to contact, stalk, or harass performers to make their perceptions and adoration known to celebrities (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2008), but these activities always occur after the interaction; that is, this actually lies “outside the para-social interaction itself” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p.252). Nevertheless, if mediated social interaction could follow the reciprocal rule, it could be considered as an effective alternative for social interaction. Furthermore, compared to the active status of media performers, media users are relatively passive in para-social interaction; however, it is hard to say who mainly leads or controls the communication in a social circumstance. Discriminating para-social interaction from social interaction is meaningful to the relevant research since social interaction is rooted in sociology, which, according to Paisley (1972)’s illustration of the level-variables matrix of behavioral fields, focuses on group or society and is at the macro level. As for para-social interaction, a human being’s imaginary relationship will emphasize the individual and micro level, which falls into the psychology field in the matrix. From this perspective, the methods to investigate the two interactions should not be the same, at least theoretically.
Identification. While the key feature of para-social interaction is that the relationship is imaginary, the main characteristic of identification is consonance (Klimmt, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2007). Identifying and sharing similar or even identical features is required to construct identification, whereas without sharing any common traits, people are still able to engage in a quasi-friendship with TV performers. Due to the two dissimilar mentalities, media users will develop into two different viewing statuses; that is, audience members will at least maintain the ability to keep the minimal social distance (Horton & Wohl, 1956) to para-socially interact with media figures, while it is impossible for them to tell the distinctions between themselves and media figures during identification (Klimmt, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2007). According to Cohen (2001), identification is defined as “a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them” (p.254). That is why some researchers would argue that identification is a non-dyadic concept to describe media users’ reactions to media figures, compared to dyadic interaction (Klimmt, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2007). In addition, being emotionally affected by a plot or being intensely absorbed by characters enables the occurrence of identification. Para-social interaction, however, does not require the alteration of awareness but places emphasis on active attachment to the plot and characters (Cohen, 1997; Cole & Leets, 1999; Cohen, 2001). In other words, “identification is not sympathy; it is empathy” (Cohen & Perse, 2003). Unlike social interaction, both identification and para-social interaction stem from psychology, but from different branches. Para-social interaction is based on interpersonal communication (Horton & Wohl, 1956), whereas identification is derived from psychoanalysis (Cohen 2001; Cohen 2003).
different patterns to analyze the two concepts have been developed. In a four-fold typology of interactions between media users and media characters, concepts including detachment, para-social interaction, identification, and capture were introduced and interpreted as parts of a complete model (Rosengren & Windahl, 1972). Grounded on this model, detachment could be explained as non-involvement; identification entails media users’ temporarily merging with media figures; para-social interaction involves media users’ responding without losing their identities; and capture results from the combination of both para-social interaction and identification. This typology is not widely accepted and used, and fundamentally speaking, it does not affect the way we interpret the two concepts.

Furthermore, identification is sometimes considered one of the functions or effects of para-social interaction (McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972). Vicariously experiencing something through watching other people’s activities in the media helps the audience understand their lives and provides them with alternative ideas or “power” to solve problems (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Giles, 2002; Tian & Hoffner, 2007), even though this kind of experience is incomplete. Whether identification should be treated from this perspective or as a parallel concept will be explained later in this paper.

Indeed, there exist some different definitions of identification, which result in different patterns of analyses on the relationship between the two concepts. However, the patterns have one perspective in common, which will be included in the first set of hypotheses in the present study:

\[ H1a: \text{Para-social interaction will be positively associated with identification.} \]

Wishful identification. The inconsistency in definitions of identification also involves another concept: wishful identification. Feilitzen and Linne (1975) and Hoffner (1996) interpret
identification as hoping to be a certain media figure, to be in a certain mediated situation of that media figure, or to act the same way that media figure does. Although this definition is not used as widely as the one introduced above, analysis of wishful identification is still worth mentioning and distinguishing from para-social interaction.

While identification is characterized as sharing media figures’ points of view, vicarious participation, and imaginability, wishful identification focuses on media users’ desire and tendencies. According to some media scholars, it is the extension of identification that people want to become or want to act in the same way as a certain media figure (Feilitzen & Linne, 1975; Hoffner, 1996). Research about wishful identification has been conducted to improve its impact on media users’ desires to be intimate with, get attracted to, identify with, imitate or interact with media figures (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Noble 1975; Hoffner, 1996). In this respect, investigation on effects of wishful identification can make contributions to how mediated messages should be conveyed, how mediated behaviors should be portrayed, and how media figures should be shaped to influence social attitude and behaviors.

Children and adolescents are main subjects in relevant research to date (Bandura, 1977; Hoffner, 1996), which is understandable because children who lack life experience need models to develop and adjust their social behaviors. As is mentioned by Comstock (1993), “television is a catalogue of modes of behavior; whether they affect what viewers do depends on their being taken as rewarding, acceptable, and applicable” (p.128). However, a media character does not have to be a behavioral model to communicate. In other words, an audience member’s desire to emulate media figures is not a required factor of para-social interaction.

In this sense, different elements will serve the formation of wishful identification and para-social interaction by different means. If this is the case, research designs about the two
phenomena should not be the same, and different control variables should be emphasized. In spite of this, some researchers do use the same variables to compare wishful identification and para-social interaction (Hoffner, 1996), which may affect the reliability of the research results.

**Similarity.** In studies of para-social interaction, identification, and wishful identification, a concept is introduced and analyzed often by many scholars: similarity. The probability of identification will be increased by perceived similarity since identification requires media users to have a feeling of “being in someone else’s shoes” (Cohen, 2001). Specifically, perceived similarity in demography and attitude (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957; Turner, 1993) and in perceived realism (Press, 1989) has been tested to see how it influences media users’ identification. However, similarity is not always thought of as a predictor in the analysis of identification. Some scholars (e.g., Liebes & Katz, 1990) define similarity as a part of identification, or one of the possible media user responses belonging to identification. The parallel concepts of similarity in identification include liking and modeling (Liebes & Katz, 1990). While identification is defined as empathy which emphasizes sharing common characteristics, empathy should be encouraged by perceived similarity between media users and media characters (e.g., Zanna, Goethals, & Hills, 1975). However, this statement does not work in every aspect. Take gender as an example. Great empathy toward the same target has not been found among men, but it was found among women (Batson et al, 1996).

Hoffner and Cantor (1991) found that perceived similarity is related to wishful identification as well. In other words, perceived similarity could be used to predict not only media users’ desire to be a certain media character but also the degree of that desire.

In addition, according to Turner (1993), a para-social interaction can be activated and promoted by the function of perceived similarity between audience members and media figures.
As one of the frequently investigated antecedents in para-social interaction (Tian & Hoffner, 2007), perceived similarity in personal characteristics, beliefs, and values will help individuals to keep balanced mental status and cognitive consistency (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958), thus playing an important role in fostering an individual’s friendships with others. It is also proposed that people might consider it rewarding to interact with or deliver personal information to other similar individuals (Tan & Singh, 1995), resulting in “confirming the validity of the respondents’ own beliefs and behaviors” (Tian & Hoffner, 2007, p.16), and leading to liking or affinity, which will be analyzed later. Some researchers even claim that perceived similarity is one of the bases of para-social interaction (Rubin & Rubin, 2001). Therefore, the following hypothesis is derived:

\[ H_{1b}: \text{Para-social interaction will be positively associated with similarity.} \]

These arguments also explain why para-social interaction is usually treated as a dependent variable, whereas perceived similarity is usually regarded as a predictor. For example, McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly (1975) tested eight elements in four aspects including background, value, appearance, and attitude to examine the homophily between media users and media characters. Furthermore, it is widely supported that the greater the perceived similarity is, the greater the para-social interaction is; and that the impact of perceived similarity will vary as the type of media character varies (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Turner, 1993). On the other hand, whether and how para-social interaction will influence people’s perceived similarity have been tested relatively less often, but it has come to gain more attention in recent years (Rubin & Rubin, 2001).

The theories related to similarity introduced above exemplify how important it is. Therefore, a basic and simple comparison between similarity and para-social interaction is worth mentioning, and is explained as follows. First of all, similarity describes media users’ judgments
about media characters. It entails perception of realism and psychological comparison by media users (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). This concept is at the cognitive level. Moreover, para-social interaction is a form of relationship. Judgment of realism and comparison are not required, whereas attachment to or attractions by media characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Cohen, 2001) are more important to construct this interaction. The concept is at the behavioral level. In addition, similarity is derived from social psychology, while para-social interaction is mainly rooted in interpersonal communication (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

**Affinity/Liking.** Two other concepts grounded in social psychology are liking and affinity (Cohen, 2001). They are but two of many ways in which media users respond to media characters and these ways do not necessarily engage two subjects or groups in a certain interactive process. According to Rubin and Perse (1987), affinity could be defined as dependency, or liking something, or being in need of something. According to Giles (2002), affinity “covers all instances where a media user displays a liking for a media figure, without identifying with them, or forming a parasocial relationship” (p.290). The two concepts interpret media users’ attitudes toward media characters. They may play a role as components of identification (Liebes & Katz, 1990; Newton & Buck, 1985), or outcomes of identification (Cohen, 2001), or the predictors of para-social interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

An individual’s liking and affinity for media characters are related to motives and likelihood of para-social interaction and fandom (Cohen & Perse, 2003; McCroskey & McCain, 1974; Spitzberg & Cohen, 2007). For example, whether a media character is socially attractive or not has a motivating influence on media users’ willingness to get involved in a para-social interaction (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Moreover, the application of affinity is most obvious in
terms of creating fictional and fantasy media figures, where it might play an important role in exaggerating the relationship between media users and media characters (Giles, 2002). Therefore,

$H_{1c}$: Para-social interaction will be positively associated with liking/affinity.

Types of media characters will also make contributions to distinguish para-social interaction, identification, and affinity to some extent. Cohen (1999) claimed that while identification is more related to leading characters (such as a hero in a film), and affinity is more related to media figures in serials (such as a popular figure in a sitcom), para-social interaction is the best term to describe media figures characterized as directly addressing viewers (such as a news anchor). As a result, types of media figures will be an effective predictor in relevant research.

*Imagination.* If liking and affinity are compared to reagents in chemical reactions of para-social interaction, imagination could be compared to a catalyst which evokes and promotes this interaction. Research in social interactions has shown that people’s imaginative acts such as hypothesizing, rehearsing, and communicating with other people will be influential in real social circumstances (Caughey, 1984). In Giles (2002)’s opinion, para-social interaction can be considered as “an extension of normal social cognition” (p.287), especially with respect to imagination. In order to construct a relationship with media characters, imagination is a power required of media users (Caughey, 1984). The reason we call it imagination or illusion is explained by Horton and Wohl (1956): “the relationship between the persona and any member of his audience is inevitably one-sided, and reciprocity between the two can only be suggested” (p.217). Taylor (1999) suggests that such an approach is very likely generated from a need for friends in childhood by those who do not have siblings.
Rooted in psychology, imaginative activities in mass media enable the persona to make contributions to “hold up a magic mirror to his followers, playing his reciprocal part more skillfully and ideally than do the partners of the real world” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p.222). Therefore, with imagination, media users are able to experience something or be immersed in some situation (e.g., talking with animated characters, or making friends with heroes in a fictional narrative) which may not be realized in reality. This also explains why Horton and Wohl (1965) state that giving audiences relational illusions with media personae is a striking feature of mass media. However, such a cognitive activity does not always act in a positive way. Take research in fandom, for example. When obsessive fans can not meet their idolized celebrity, they probably feel highly frustrated because their relational goal is not achieved, although the relationship is unrealistic and unreciprocated from the very beginning (Pomerantz, Saxon, & Oishi, 2000). Such an intense disappointment mainly originates in their imagination or imagined exaggeration toward the failure of their goal (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2008).

In fact, imagination has been analyzed even more often in research about identification, but media users do not maintain their independent identity in such imagined situations. On the contrary, keeping self identity, media users in para-social interaction have a different illusion that stresses “directness and immediacy of participation” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p.219). Furthermore, imagination does not only have relations with para-social interaction and identification, but also imitation, which is another important concept often mentioned in relevant research (e.g., Maccoby & Wilson, 1957). Imagining possessing some certain characteristics or perceived similarity may evoke audiences desire to emulate media figures’ performances or behaviors (Hoffner and Buchanan, 2005).
**Imitation.** In early research and even some recent research, imitation is an interchangeable word for wishful identification. Hoffner (1996) defines imitation as a “desire to be like or behave in ways similar to a character” (p.19). The limitation of this conceptualization, however, is apparent. Although they have similarities, the essence of wishful identification is media users’ desire, while imitation is not people’s expectations, but modeling, either for identity or for behavior. While wishful identification does not imply an actual emulating action, the best nature of imitation is action.

There are two basic reasons for the existence of imitation. Media figures, especially celebrities, are often emulated because they are usually characterized with attractive qualities or traits people are willing to possess or develop (Boon & Lomore, 2001). 25 years after Elvis Presley died, for instance, he is still a role model who is idolized and whose physical appearance, behaviors, and performance are imitated by his fans (Fraser & Brown, 2002). Media figures’ function in encouraging imitation also leads to investigation about relations between types of media figures and people’s attitudinal and behavioral change in society. A good example is a radio host’s impact on listeners’ viewpoints and manners on social concerns (Rubin & Step, 2000). The research shows a positive correlation between para-social interaction and the talk radio host’s influence on listeners’ personal standpoints, and whether listeners would take and act on the host’s suggestions on social problems could be predicted by para-social interaction as well.

The second reason is around media users. Media users will only be the learner if they wish. This usually happens when certain admirable features catch attentions of media users who expect to refine themselves, or improve their lives (Rubin & Perse, 1987; Cohen & Perse, 2003). Education programs combined with fictional and entertaining elements have been proven to
cause social attitudinal and behavioral change in a positive way (Brown & Coby, 1999). This is partly attributed to media users’ motivations and tendencies to imitate media characters (Tian & Hoffner, 2007). Harrison’s (1997) study suggests that since adolescents are more impressionable, modeling effects of media figures will be greater.

Relevant research topics include effects of media users’ demography on distinctions in imitation, the length of the effects, and so on. A good example would be the differences of emulating behavior between girls and boys. While girls are more willing to imitate female characters, boys will be more likely to choose male characters as models (Hoffner, 1996). In addition, boys prefer to imitate those who have greater physical strength and higher activity level; and physical attractiveness is the most important factor to determine girls’ imitation behavior (Reeves & Lometti, 1979; Reeves & Miller, 1978). Notwithstanding these distinctions, children would emulate successful media figures, despite that they may not agree with the figures’ behavior at a moral level (Liss, Reinhardt, & Fredriksen, 1983).

From the examples discussed, a statement could be claimed that understanding reasons and effects of imitation will aid in elucidating the patterns by which televised performers shape norms and standards of social behaviors, as well as contribute to develop media information designed to produce people’s conduct changes on social issues. In Cohen’s (1999) research about para-social interaction of Arabian and Jewish adolescents, results illustrate that favorite media figures are less likely to be imitated but treated as friends. The finding actually reveals the first difference between para-social interaction and imitation, namely, it is more appropriate to describe a viewer in para-social interaction as a friend, whereas learner is a more appropriate description for a viewer in imitation (Bandura, 2002). Media users will judge the outcomes that may follow their imitating behavior (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957), but this is not necessarily true.
for para-social interaction. Secondly, although attraction is an important determinant for both the phenomena, attraction in the process of imitation puts more emphasis on modeling instead of friendship. This leads to another difference. Companionship is widely accepted as the primary purpose or function of para-social interaction (Giles, 2002); learning and acquisition of a new behavior, on the other hand, is the priority for imitation (Bandura, 2002). Furthermore, imitation is based on observation and rooted in experimental psychology (Cohen, 2001), and analyzed by social learning theory (Bandura, 2002). Compared to this, para-social interaction is rooted in interpersonal communication, as it is mentioned before.

*A Model of Para-social Interaction*

Comparisons of the concepts and characteristics between para-social interaction and several other descriptions of people’s reactions in the media context lead to a better understanding of our topic. Essentially, however, para-social interaction is a process, or a pattern. Therefore, it is more meaningful to investigate how the process works and functions, instead of only the end result. Although there does not exist a widely accepted and popular agreement about the pattern of para-social interaction, relevant discussions such as models (Giles, 2002; Perse & Rubin, 1989), and dimensions and involvements (Sood & Rogers, 2000) have been proposed by many researchers. Based on these propositions, various theories in psychology, and the characteristics analyzed above, a more complete and comprehensive model will be stated and described to help further investigate this phenomenon. We should bear in mind that though the steps or dimensions will be analyzed one by one, it does not mean that they are strictly unrelated to one another, or that they just happen individually and separately; instead, they are connected and mixed. In addition, para-social interaction does not require the presence of every dimension.
The dimensions are discussed because they may be included in the process, but not necessarily a prerequisite or a component.

**Affective dimension.** The model begins with the affection of media users. In para-social interaction, affection means the degree of audience members’ interpersonal reactions to media characters (Tsao, 1996), in other words, how media users feel about media characters. According to Tsay and Banjo’s research in testing the strength of the inherent interpersonal nature of para-social interactions (2007), if another audience experiences a similar para-social interaction to oneself, the corresponding level of jealousy and envy will be evoked. Actually, jealousy and envy are but two typical affective responses in the context of a relationship. Jealousy, for instance, is defined as a certain type of fear in losing the relationship. And other “affective responses encompass anxiety, suspicions, dread of loss, and anger resulting from betrayal” (Hupka, 1984; as cited by Tsay & Banjo, 2007, para. 3). Not limited to jealousy, feeling sorry for media figures when they make mistakes (Sood & Rogers, 2000), feeing happy for media figures when an expected marriage is held (Singhai, Obregon, & Rogers, 1994), or feeing sad when a tragedy happens to the leading character (Wang & Singhal, 1992), are all expressions of media users’ affections. Furthermore, the affective interaction might have extensions toward third parties. In studies of sports fandom, more aggressions and potential risks are reported to those regarded as rivals who might become obstacles to fans’ affective idolizations of their own teams (Wann, Peterson, Cothran, & Dykes, 1999). Exaggerating the consequences when they fail to actually communicate with characters may weaken media users’ self-esteem, which is another form of affective interaction with media figures, and which has continuous impacts on audiences’ affective responses (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2008).
Formulated by Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor (1987), social penetration theory is applied to explain the occurrence and development of relational closeness, that is, as the self-disclosure takes place, closeness occurs; as the level of revelation by participants develops gradually and orderly, intimacy grows. This proposition is helpful in analyzing affective dimension of para-social interaction at a theoretical level. In examining hopelessness’s affective effects on older adults, Chory-Assad and Yanen (2005) found that affective perception about their future lives is negatively associated with their affective interactions with TV characters, and interest in favorite TV personality as well. This research result is consistent with the social penetration theory. Not being very enthusiastic and happy leads to being less likely to actively express and reveal one self, and being less likely to positively process messages from outside sources, including media messages. Consequently, their interests in favorite TV personalities and corresponding intimacy with TV characters will not be as intense as that of those embracing life with enthusiasm.

However, some researchers explore and explain the affective component of para-social interaction from a totally different perspective. In Konijn and Hoorn’s investigation (2005) of viewers’ involvement with fictional characters, the affection system is believed to have two paralleled working subsystems, positive and negative. While the positive tendency promotes involvement with and fondness of media characters, the negative tendency promotes distance from media characters. More importantly, the two subsystems are identified as separate tendencies which are able to exist at the same time, in other words, intimacy and remoteness do not necessarily exclude each other.

Besides, affective responses of media users play an important role in entertainment media, which is driven by entertaining figures to a large degree, whether they are fictional or otherwise
(Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006), because media figures in entertainment media are
developed purposely and deliberately to evoke people’s affective and emotional responses. The
practical significance also explains why entertainment researchers have been showing great
interest in studies of the affective component in interactions between media users and media
figures (Klimmt, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2007). On the contrary, it is usually harder for newscasters
to engage viewers in a highly affective status, even though they want to in some cases, since they
merely appear in the same certain television genre, which sets limitations for achieving this goal
(Giles, 2000).

**Cognitive dimension.** In the study of para-social interaction of letter-writers with a popular
Indian soap opera, Sood and Rogers (2000) state that “a high level of affective interaction led
some letter-writers to perceive ‘Hum Log’ as reality, rather than fiction” (p.401). In fact, when
this happens, audience members are in a cognitive interaction with the TV show.

Cognition in para-social interaction means how media users judge media characters,
including paying attention to and thinking over the content, the meaning, and the valence of a
program (Sood & Rogers, 2001), trying to understand media characters’ circumstances and
thoughts, following motivations gained through watching the program whether consciously or
not, and appraise the value of the content. Not limited to these, psychological inferences about
media characters’ behavior and program content also belong to cognitive responses of media
users (Giles, 2000). Chory-Assad and Yanen (2005) found that older adults’ cognitive
expectations about their future lives have positive association with their para-social interaction
with TV characters. The research also demonstrates that “parasocial interaction may rely most
heavily on more controlled, rational, cognitive functions” (p.195).
It is believed that para-social interaction happens on the condition that media characters’ personality is similar to or the same as someone in media users’ social circle (Rubin, Perse & Powell, 1985). Further, how to define this similarity is mostly related to media users’ personal judgment, which falls into the cognitive catalog. For example, morality is proved as the major determinant of viewers’ cognitive judgment in crime drama (Raney, 2005). In view of this, the primary way to manipulate media users’ para-social experience is to manipulate their cognitive experience. In 1940s, UK radio broadcasters deliberately shifted the way they approached listeners to a more personal and informal level (Scannell, 1996). Apparently, the major purpose of shifting their broadcasting style was to better manage listeners’ cognitive experience during media consumption.

Besides the personal values mentioned above (e.g., morality in crime drama), viewers’ cognitive judgment is primarily influenced by personal knowledge (Giles, 2002) and personal experience (Sood & Rogers, 2000). For example, knowledge in jurisprudence may lead to extra attention and observation in lawyers’ problems solving skills and judges’ dealing methods for special cases in Boston Legal; knowledge in medical science may give rise to affections to high emergence reaction abilities and exquisite diagnosis capacity of characters in House. On the other hand, referring media content to individual life experience is another form of cognitive interaction, which is termed as referential involvement by Sood and Rogers (2000). This happens when media users make judgments “in terms of their own lives and problems” (p.391).

However, being able to discriminate between real people and fictional characters at a cognitive level does not necessarily correspond with supposed affective responses. In other words, even though a viewer cognitively knows that a certain character does not exist in reality, he might affectively or emotionally treat it as if it is real, which is coined as the paradox of
fiction by Tuskchinsky (2007). The gap between media users’ cognitive judgment and affective response also expresses the necessity and significance of distinguishing the two dimensions in para-social interaction research.

A theory used very often to bridge the gap between cognition and affection and to explain enjoyment of media content is affective disposition theory (Raney, 2006; Zillmann & Bryant, 1994). According to this theory, media users’ affective disposition toward media characters and cognitive evaluation about what happens to them are the two fundamentally decisive factors for media enjoyment (Raney, 2006). It suggests that positively appreciating a media figure leads to media users’ hope of good outcomes for the figure; finally gaining the wanted outcomes for that figure leads to an increase of media enjoyment; and vice versa. Moreover, para-social encounters will result in a positive preference for media characters as well (Tian & Hoffner, 2007).

To date, researchers have used many theories to explain cognitions in para-social interaction, such as personal construct theory, social identity theory, and social comparison theory. In this paper, social cognitive theory will be illustrated in more detail. Stemming from social learning theory, social cognitive theory entails two primary statements, that people learn a certain behavior by observing how others act under a particular circumstance, and that people’s own information processing system is the essential determinant for understanding, whether the personality is mediated or not (Bandura, 1986). In accordance with this theory, some research does prove that after watching events and behaviors of media characters with whom they have para-social interactions (observation process in social learning theory), and reflecting on their valence (information processing in social learning theory), media users do acquire some behavioral standards and criteria for future conduct (Hoffner, 1996). As the para-social
experience continues, those standards and criteria will be reinforced since viewers’ cognitive accessibility improves (Klimmt, Hartmann & Schramm, 2006). The advantage of mediated environment in this is that media not only offers role models to media users, but also renders them the right to select their preferred role model to engage in vicarious experience and the freedom to begin and terminate the interaction (Bandura, 2001). Social cognitive theory has also suggested that perceived similarity will increase the possibility of cognitive interactions (Bandura, 2001). This is probably because similar experience or events from real lives will make it easier and more possible for media users to compare, judge, imagine, and understand the situation. In the study of children’s sex-stereotyped self-socialization (Knobloch, Callison, Chen, Fritzche, & Zillmann, 2005), girls from United States, China, and Germany are all generally more inclined to choose female protagonists when asked to make a choice from the videotape covers. The researchers applied perceived similarity in social cognitive theory that we have discussed to explain this phenomenon, which is consistent with our explanation.

*Behavioral dimension.* The theory also claims that “participating vicariously in another’s experiences is an important cognitive function with implications for attitudinal and behavioral changes” (Tian & Hoffner, 2007, p.16). This is related to the third dimension of the para-social interaction model, behavior.

The definition of behavior is pretty diversified due to the emphasis on and preference to different aspects of media users’ behavior by different researchers. Generally speaking, it means post viewing conducts, and it is a result or influence of para-social interaction. The manifestation of it ranges from discussing media messages or media figures with other media users or media actors (Rubin & Perse, 1989), and reflecting on the program content and/or trying to put it into practice (Rubin & Perse, 1987), to predicting following happenings in a story and/or engaging
“in aesthetic construction of a media message”, in other words, designing program plot (Sood & Rogers, 2001), imitating media characters’ behavior (Tian & Hoffner, 2007), even doing some inappropriate things (Spitzberg and Cupach, 2008), and so on.

Uncertainty reduction theory was formulated by Berger and Calabrese in 1975 to describe and discuss two individuals’ relational development. According to this theory, the relationship of two persons grows as a process of exploration, through which a person is able to gain information to reduce uncertainty toward another person. And the final result, or “the final stage of interactional relationship” (Berger, 1979), is to make a decision about either liking or disliking the media character, and either continuing or stopping the relationship.

Berger (1979) also summarized three basic strategies for uncertainty reduction, which will be applied to explain some behaviors in para-social interaction. Watching television and observing media figures are categorized as passive strategies, which are basic for developing para-social encounters. For example, through observation a child might find that a character is kind, helpful and caring, meanwhile, the para-social interaction between this child and such a character will be higher (Hoffner, 1996); sometimes, people may try to adjust their schedule to watch the targeted TV soap opera on time and may also feel bad if they miss an episode; and paying more attention to liked rather than disliked characters will lead to stronger influence of liked characters on audience members’ behavior (Tian & Hoffner, 2007).

On the other hand, people who prefer active strategies are more willing to talk about what they have seen and thought. Around 13 percent subjects in Sood and Rogers’ research (2000) wrote letters to the program in the name of a group or an organization. This index illustrates that people in some groups or organizations like discussing the program after it is over, and it is probably because information from others can provide effective verification for the
validity of a media user’s own beliefs and behaviors. It points out another important facet of para-social interaction research: to what extent can other media users influence a certain media user’s para-social behavior? For example, hearing some gossip about a news anchor from a friend might diminish positive impressions on him, as a result, trust and para-social interaction decrease. As is mentioned by Giles (2002), if a person is very easily influenced by peers, his/her personal judgments will easily be colored, so will his/her behavior.

As for the third type of strategies, greeting a broadcaster as if he/she is an acquaintance seems to be an example of interactive strategies in para-social interaction, but this is not the case, since interactive strategies are two sided, such as question and answer, or deception and detection. That is also why this type of strategies has almost never been used to explain para-social interaction.

However, the disadvantage of uncertainty reduction theory is its limitation in explaining audience members’ reflections on program content and their endeavor to put their thoughts into practice, which are better explained by social learning theory. This theory posits that people learn new behaviors by observing others, weighing costs and benefits, and deciding to pick up the behavior or not (Bandura, 1977). It does not focus on people’s information processing system as much as social cognitive theory does, which is not that crucial in this dimension; it pays more attention to the adoption of others’ behavior although it has overlapping components such as observation, compared with uncertainty reduction theory. A good case to interpret this would still be Sood and Rogers’ (2000) study of letter-writers’ para-social interaction after watching the Indian soap opera, “Hum Log”.

Some letter-writers indicated that they had not only learned about social issues from viewing ‘Hum Log’ but also took steps to change their own behavior. People signed up for eye-
donation, opened children’s clubs, and expressed a desire to work in a women’s association, as did Badki, the eldest daughter in the ‘Hum Log’ family. (p.403)

After observing what Badki does in that show, many Indian people treat her as a role model because Badki not only stands for a unique behavioral style but also a great hope for realization of positive and desired outcomes in real social settings. While some viewers just want to adopt Badki’s behavioral standards or norms and be a good person, some others want to do the exact same things as she does, which is referred to another expression of behavioral interactions: imitation. As an independent concept which is analyzed before, imitation has been discussed a lot by many researchers. Some media users will dress up like celebrities, pick up their favorite characters’ pet phrase, or imitate celebrities’ walking style.

H 1d: Para-social interaction will be positively associated with imitation.

In fact, over obsessed with a media character might result in excessive pursuit behaviors, such as mailing unwanted gifts, stalking celebrities in public, or invading their home (McCutcheon, Aruguete, Scott, Parker, & Calicchia, 2006). Studies about these inappropriate behaviors will be very valuable especially considering they are fearful and even threatening to celebrities.

In fact, the behavioral dimension or the behavioral effects of para-social interaction on people’s lives have been relatively less studied. This has already caused some researchers’ attention and more investigation has been called for (Rubin & Rubin, 2001; Tian & Hoffner, 2007; Tsao, 2004).

There is no doubt that every dimension in this model is connected with each other. A case in point is the Spitzberg and Cupach’s study in fandom (2008), “the obsessed fan’s rumination about connecting with the celebrity (cognitive judgment), along with escalating
negative affect (continuous affective interaction), fosters persistence in attempting to establish a relationship with the celebrity (behavioral pursuit)” (p.24).

The most important advantage of proposing such a continuum model for para-social interaction is to help researchers find out what aspects and dimensions should be focused on, what theories are more appropriate for explanations, what measures work more effectively, what details we need to pay closer attention to, and so on. This continuum model could be expressed using the following flow chart.
— means “interactive”  —— means “includes”

Affection
(Social Penetration Theory……)
“Feeling”
Positive Subsystem ——— Negative Subsystem

Widely
Accepted

Cognition
(Social Cognitive Theory, Personal Construct Theory, Social identity theory, Social Comparison Theory……)
“Judgment”

Personal Value
Knowledge
Experience

Behavior
(Uncertainty Reduction Theory, Social Learning Theory……)
“Conduct”

Discussion ——— Prediction/Plots Design ——— Stalking ——— Imitation ——— Fandom ——— Other conducts
To design such a model for para-social interaction may seem a little contrived since it deliberately divides the integrity as an interactive process into several separate parts. However, the very organized divisions will be very helpful and functional in further investigation and application. For example, to evoke different dimensions or different aspects of one dimension of para-social interaction, media planners could draw on some reliable experiment results or experience of researchers, and accordingly apply particular shooting styles, editing forms, or other production technologies in their program to achieve their goal.

When aged viewers are exposed to similar old people with negative depictions, uncomfortable feelings such as loneliness, unimportance, and unwantedness will be elicited (Kubey, 1980). Thus, in helping aged viewers to build better self-concepts, a program focusing on their affective and cognitive reactions is more likely to bring about changes in their feelings and judgment about their lives and themselves. This is an example regarding the affective and cognitive dimensions in the model. The following one will deal more with the behavioral dimension. Hoffner’s research (1996) points out that attractiveness and intelligence of media characters can be used to predict para-social interaction with male characters for both girls and boys, whereas strength only works for boys. Furthermore, TV viewing is reported as an important role in making contributions to the American children’s socialization (Comstock, 1993). Accordingly, in order to activate boys’ attention and reinforce para-social interaction between them and some media characters, feature depictions such as improvement of a male character’s physical strength, or magic power, or other similar elements geared toward such changes will be functional. From the opposite perspective, the model will be also helpful in explaining why some media characters are more likely to engage in para-social interaction, and to elicit boys’ willingness to observe, to share and to learn.
Para-social Interaction as a Psychological Phenomenon

The examples of older adults and children are merely the tip of an iceberg in utility of this model. How to incorporate this model with more relevant research, in order to manifest its utility in explanation and prediction, is largely driven by the functions of para-social interaction.

By specifically studying quiz programs’ followers in Britain, McQuail et al. (1972) identified four essential types of media use functions, two of which are suitable for elaborating para-social interaction: personal identity and personal relationships (p.447).

Personal identity comprises of three sub-categories: personal reference, reality exploration, and value reinforcement (p.447). In other words, it exemplifies diversified ways of understanding people’s own lives. To investigate selective exposure to news portrayals, Knoblock-Westerwick and Hastall (2006) found that young men dedicated remarkably more exposure to news about young males, and spent extraordinarily less time in news about older women. This is probably because similar age and similar gender, the two unchangeable characteristics, made the comparison between readers and media figures more defined. Having such characteristics, people may be challenged by the same problems during the same stage of life (e.g., trying to find a job as a green hand/personal reference), more concerned with similar threats as women or men (e.g., struggling to defeat breast cancer/reality exploration), or bothered by a similar moral dilemma in a similar situation (e.g., whether to sustain an unhappy marriage just because of religious belief/value reinforcement). This could be interpreted along with Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory, since people are driven to evaluate their personal values and capabilities by comparing themselves to outside images, and observers are inclined to narrow the aspects of compatibility when the comparison parameter goes too divergently from them, and the tendency increases as the
divergence increases. Due to the unaccountable amount of information from media sources, trying to find the targeted message or images is not only a gratification, but also a requirement for media users.

Social comparison could be divided into two directions: upward and downward. For one thing, people are believed to compare themselves to those who are better off in order to make self-improvements, or to help them gain confidence in doing as well as elites; for another, people are also believed to make comparisons between themselves and people in a worse situation to enhance self-esteem (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler 2002). There has been research showing that people with low self-esteem are more likely to enjoy downward comparisons to enhance them per se (Willis, 1991). Yet there also exits research showing the exact opposite results, that people with low self-esteem would prefer upward comparisons to make connections between excellent people and them per se (Vohs & Heatherton, 2004). To the best of my knowledge, there has not been any theoretical or systematic explanation or application of psychological theories for these “paradoxical findings” (Suls & Wills, 1991).

In fact, the “dilemma of paradoxical situation” does not only happen in the category of personal identity, but also in the other type of media function, personal relationship. In the two sub-types of personal relationships (companionship and social utility), only “companionship” has been used, and actually very widely used, to stand for media users’ gratification in a vicarious relationship with media characters. Regardless of the fact that research findings about companionship are not consistent, proposal of such media function did make contributions in bringing researchers’ attention to para-social interaction since “there was little significant interest in PSI until the advent of the uses and gratifications approach to mass communication research in the early 1970s” (McQuail et al., 1972; Rosengren & Windahl, 1972; as cited in Giles, 2002, p.280). From then on, more and more
studies have come to support the idea that para-social interaction functions as an alternative companionship due to the deficiency of social interactions (Auter & Palmgreen, 1993; Cohen, 1997; Cohen & Metzger, 1998; Conway & Rubin, 1991; Doolittle, 1979; Rubin, 1979; Rubin, 1981; Rubin et al., 1985; Tsao, 1996; Turner, 1993). For example, an increase of para-social interaction was found among audience members who felt lonelier or had less interactive alternatives (Levy, 1979). Endorsed expressions in media consumptions of this category include “I will not feel alone when I watch the show”, “I cannot live without the character’s voice when the show is on”, and “I treat the character as my close friend”, etc. Along this line of consideration, McQuail et al. (1972) analyzed the radio program, The Dales, and the TV series, Coronation Street, and claimed that the companionship gratification provided by media have even stronger impacts than what is expected, “the characters may become virtually real, knowable and cherished individuals, and their voices are more than just a comforting background which breaks the silence of an empty house” (p.449).

However, as is mentioned above, this function has been questioned by a number of “paradoxical findings” with various “probable” explanations. With the predictions that para-social interaction would have strong association with the need for companionship, and that the association would be stronger than those related to imitation and identification, Cohen and Perse (2003) found that the relationship is neither stronger than those with imitation or identification, nor strong by itself at all. Conversely, the need for companionship is just “marginally” related to para-social interaction, but “significantly” related to imitation and identification (p.23). The two researchers explained this phenomenon with Kanazawa’s research finding in 2002. The finding suggests that the more the audience members feel content with their social lives, the more time they want to spend with their televised friends. The researchers argued that “parasocial interaction should be understood not through a ‘need’
perspective, but rather through a ‘skills’ perspective’ (p.24); and that “people do not relate to television characters primarily because they need to, but because they can” (p.24). Although older people seem needier for companionship and thus more likely to use media as compensation (Perloff & Krevans, 1987), Chory-Assad and Yanen’s study (2005) still could not prove the need for companionship (loneliness) as an effective predictor for aged viewers’ para-social interaction. They argued that “loneliness’s inability to predict the other involvement types may be due to the participants being relatively nonlonely” (p.195).

The argument toward companionship between the two viewpoints seems pretty intense and both of them are able to provide a lot of evidence to support their opinions. So, why are the research findings inconsistent with one another? And can we find a resolution to solve this “problem”?

In fact, when bringing up the idea of media functions in 1972, McQuail et al. have outlined some basic presuppositions to guide their study, which seemed to be neglected. The most fundamental one, according to the authors, is that media consumption is “goal-directed”. This presupposition displays its significance through the following quote: “we could not proceed far with our investigation without it” (p.440). Therefore, is it possible that those “paradoxical findings” are the results of various media consumption goals? The question was actually answered by another presupposition that “diverse and overlapping patterns of motive and satisfaction” (p.440) were supposed to be found. Relevant research should help us to reveal this fact, instead of ignoring it or hiding it. That is the reason quotation marks are put on the words “paradoxical findings” since it is reasonable to find inconsistency in our research and those findings are not real paradoxical. What is more, they exemplify the diverse needs and goals of media consumption. The interpretation of the two presuppositions does assist us in understanding the existence of the contradictory research results, but as for
how to explain the nature of those goals theoretically and how to classify them systematically, Maslow's hierarchy of needs would be more helpful.

In the paper *A Theory of Human Motivation* (1943), Maslow formulated a motivation centered theory about humans’ needs being grouped into five levels: physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs, and needs for self-actualization. The levels, which are always portrayed as a pyramid, are ranked on the basis of their importance. Furthermore, Maslow believed that people seek for upper level needs in the hierarchy under the condition that the lower level needs are satisfied first; and that if this condition no longer exists, people will adjust their priority temporarily and make sure the lower level needs are fulfilled before they go back to the upper levels.

Among the five layers of the pyramid, social needs provided us with the reason why media would be treated as an alternative companionship. Once the physiological needs and safety needs are met, people will switch their attention to their needs in love, affection, and belongingness and they will do their best to overcome loneliness, alienation, and depressions through friendships, families, romantic relationships, sports teams, religious groups, or other kinds of connections. Media, undoubtedly, belongs to the connections. Maslow stated that the acceptance and companionship people hunger for “are customarily hedged about with many restrictions and inhibitions” (p.33) and “the thwarting of these needs is the most commonly found core in cases of maladjustment and more severe psychopathology” (p.33). His words manifest how important and how popular the social needs is to human beings. They also illustrate why there exist more research evidence supporting para-social interaction’s function of companionship and why more scholars agree on this opinion in its argument of dilemma.
However, companionship is just one aspect of one certain level in human’s hierarchy of needs. People are also eager to have “a stable, firmly based, (usually) high evaluation of themselves…” (p.33). Thus, people engage themselves in various activities to gain a sense of recognition, accomplishment, and respect from others. The positive correlation between media users’ gratification to social lives and their desire to be with media friends found in Kanazawa’s study (2002) also demonstrates such level of needs. People with great ability and performance in socializing may not only want to be recognized in their real lives, but in the media world as well. Cohen and Perse’s unexpected research finding (2003) also serves as an example of human’s esteem needs. The finding suggests that the relationship between para-social interaction and companionship is just marginal, while that between imitation/identification and companionship is significant. It is interesting to note that most respondents of that research were family members of the research assistants, because the data was collected during the Thanksgiving holidays. With the tradition of gathering of family members and friends, people’s companionship needs would be gratified to a large degree, which would lead to higher level needs spontaneously. In addition, people generally prefer to imitate or identify with attractive individuals because they want to possess similar characteristics that would be attended to and appreciated, and media will certainly supply plenty of choices.

Besides, Chory-Assad & Yanen’s (2005) inability to use loneliness as a factor to predict aged people’s para-social interaction was not due to the fact that loneliness has no effect on the result, but was because loneliness is only one of the causes among several other, which varies in accordance with people’s needs. In consequence, it would be easier to understand the existence of such an intense debate of whether the desire of companionship has positive association with para-social interaction, if we adjust the way we treat those “paradoxical
findings”. In other words, both the desire for companionship and the desire for respect and recognition have positive associations with para-social interaction, but more importantly, they work under different situations. For a more effective analysis, the second set of hypotheses will be examined:

\[ H_2: \text{Age is positively correlated with para-social interaction, identification, similarity, affinity/liking, and imitation.} \]

The adjustment of our reflections on research evidence will also enlighten us on the controversial issue in social comparison. While the needs for reputation and respect may drive people to pursue upward comparisons, downward comparisons must be driven by some desires as well, such as safety needs. This type of needs involves people’s desire to control inconsistency and injustice, and to live in an orderly and secure world. A person who just lost a job may not be interested in watching happy characters, especially when characters would gain something; people diagnosed with cancer might prefer to watch sad films.

However, downward comparisons just exemplify one aspect of safety needs. Facing unfamiliar, unpredictable, or unmanageable situations will elicit such type of needs, which would be reflected by media consumption as well. When asked about perceptions of a road crash in a program, respondents replied, “…you feel as if they had been in a real accident and you’d like to do something for them” (McQuail et al., 1972, p.449) and “Shattered. I’m very upset. I hope they’ll be all right” (McQuail et al., 1972, p.449). An Indian TV soap opera viewer even actively wrote a letter to the screenwriter and suggested that letting the grandmother in the show recover from cancer, otherwise, according to his/her words, “there will be a widespread fear that there is no cure for cancer in India…(and) that Indian doctors are incompetent” (Sood & Rogers, 2000, p.391). In conclusion, people’s security needs for
jobs and finance and safety needs against accidents and illnesses do have impact on the way they interact with media.

As is emphasized by Maslow (1943), before higher needs emerge or become dominant motivations, humans’ physiological needs must be gratified first. Physiological needs are the most fundamental and prepotent needs, and are related to humans’ survival. Do these basic needs have relationships with para-social interaction? In fact, when introducing the phenomenon of para-social interaction in 1956, Horton and Wohl expounded two “personality” programs with sexual suggestiveness to describe drastic para-sociability. *The Lonesome Gal*, a short radio program broadcast in 1951 in the first example, was about a lonesome girl’s monologue. Sexiness was hinted by “a throaty, unctuous voice” with “a strongly intimate line” (p. 224). The female broadcaster would speak “as if she was addressing a lover in the utter privacy of some hidden rendezvous” (p.224). This program was so popular that it widely spread among ninety cities across the whole country and thousands of letters with marriage proposals flooded in. Another example is a five-minute TV program, *Count Sheep*, broadcast at 1 a.m. during weekdays. In this successful show, a pretty woman emerges in a lavishly decorated bedroom clad in a peignoir, or negligee, minces around the room, stretches, yawns, jumps into bed, and then wriggles out again for a final romp with her French poodle. Then she crawls under the covers, cuddles up for the night, and composes herself for sleep. The camera pans down for an enormous close-up, and the microphones catch Miss Berg whispering a sleepy “Good-night”. (p.226)

The seduction was not expressed in a usual way in both of the programs. Instead, they were designed to suggest sexiness over an ordinary sense to attract people’s attention. It
cannot be denied that sexual suggestiveness did make the most contributions to the accomplishments of both programs. Being one of people’s basic needs, sex has two unique characteristics to differentiate itself from the other basic needs such as food, water, sleep, or breath. The other needs may determine the continuity of human body functions, but sex does not have such a power. This is why sex is an exceptional element at this level, and why it does not have to be attained prior to reaching other levels. On the other hand, sexual behavior does not merely result from sexual needs, but might be due to some other needs at a different level, such as the need of love at the social needs level. Therefore, preference to program with sexual suggestiveness is not necessarily led by sexual needs. Deeper investigation needs to be conducted to identify the exact needs for such behaviors. However, a preliminary research question will be discussed in the present study:

*RQ 1: Do the genders differ in media users’ para-social interaction, identification, affinity/liking, similarity, and imitation?*

The highest layer in the pyramid is the needs for self-actualization, which means “the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become the actualized in what he is potentially” (Maslow, 1943, p. 34). It is actually a challenge to find as many media consumption research related to the needs at this level as to those at other levels. First of all, the needs for self-actualization will only emerge when the needs in other hierarchies are gratified, which is very rare among human beings in our society. Secondly, even if such type of needs finally emerges, it will be easily interrupted whenever physiological, safety, social, and esteem needs are not satisfied. As a result, how the needs for self-actualization can guide media use and how long this guidance can last need further analysis and investigation. However, based on the same reasons, we believe that media research relevant to needs at this level will be more fruitful than other areas since media is equipped with the specialty to
provide a great deal of sources for imagination and illusion. A case in point is that the
behavioral dimension in para-social interaction entails imaginative behaviors, such as
identifying self as the superman, or the super model in a show after para-socializing with the
characters for too many times.

What we should also bear in mind is that human beings are capable of figuring out what
their interests and motives are, whether consciously or unconsciously. A good example
would be the case of John Hinckley Jr., where the person was trying to demonstrate how
much he loved the actress Jodie Foster by shooting American president Ronald Reagan
(Giles, 2000). Basically, it would be hard for anyone to connect the two things together,
unless you were John Hinckley, who knew what motivated him and what he was capable of.

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs gives reasons to believe that media consumption will be
largely guided by people’s needs. Thus, there does not exist a uniform rule of para-social
interaction. With diverse motivations and the ability to recognize them, people are attracted
by different media content and media characters, leading to diversified para-social interaction
research findings, which might seem paradoxical.

In the section of “Distinctions from Other Concepts”, an important idea is expressed
that para-social is a distinctive concept in describing one of the diversified manners among
many interactive situations in media. There are differences and similarities between para-
social interaction and social interaction, identification, wishful identification, similarity,
affinity, liking, imitation, and imagination. Most of the previous studies have put emphasis
on analyzing one of those phenomena. Only few studies focused on investigating the
relationship between two of them, or comparing two of them (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Hoffner,
1996; Tian & Hoffner, 2007). Few studies have examined the relationship among several
interactive phenomena in media before.
In the section of “The Model of Para-social interaction”, a comprehensive model is stated to elucidate how para-social interaction functions as a process, rather than an end result. From analyzing the three dimensions of the model and explaining corresponding examples of each dimension, we can learn that interactive phenomena in media explained by other concepts are reflected in the process of para-social interaction. For example, a media user might want to emulate the media character he/she has para-social interacted for a while. In this case, the phenomenon conceptualized by imitation is showed in the behavioral dimension of para-social interaction.

Considering the paucity of studies on relationship between para-social interaction and other interactive phenomena in media, and the fact that a better understanding of the overlapping components between para-social interaction and other relevant concepts will be helpful in forming a more detailed and thorough theoretical perspective on further investigations of para-social interaction, the present study will test the relationships between para-social interaction and the following concepts: identification, similarity, liking/affinity, and imitation.

However, investigating relationships among different interactive phenomena in the media without testing other relevant and important variables is almost inevitably an oversimplification. Besides media user’s age and gender mentioned above, another element tested and analyzed often was frequency of exposure, or exposure levels, or length of acquaintance. While in some studies (e.g., Perse & Rubin, 1989) frequency of exposure is positively correlated with para-social interaction, some other studies (e.g., Auter & Palmgreen, 2000) offered an opposite research result. Thus, the following research questions will be discussed.
RQ 2: Do the general exposure levels differ in participants’ para-social interaction, identification, affinity/liking, similarity, and imitation?

RQ 3: Do the favorite program exposure levels differ in participants’ para-social interaction, identification, affinity/liking, similarity, and imitation?
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In order to study the correlations between para-social interaction and the other psychological concepts proposed by various researchers, a survey was designed to investigate their shared properties. A survey method was used because variables with different characteristics (para-social interaction, identification, similarity, liking/affinity, and imitation) were examined in the present research, especially considering that media consumption experience varied greatly from person to person. Since most of the extant research on para-social interaction was conducted using surveys, comparisons between the present one and previous studies would provide a means to improve and examine the reliability and validity of this area of research.

Measurement

It is Rosengren and Windahl who were the first researchers devoted to measuring para-social interaction. They designed a respondent self-categorization measurement in 1972, which did not correspond to the four-fold typology of relations between media users and media characters. Later in 1976, a 10-item survey with three items indicating one variable was developed to investigate whether para-social interaction can be a functional alternative to social interaction (Rosengren, Windahl, Hakansson, & Johnsson-Smaragdi). The three-item scale was considered stronger than the previous measurement by the authors. However, only a weak association was found in their Scandinavian para-social interaction research. In three other surveys conducted by Nordlund (1978) in Sweden, variables were operationalized in three ways to represent a multi-method attempt. To investigate the content preference in
media interaction, four indices were developed to measure it in four distinct types: “serial stories in magazines, serials in television, quiz programs, and entertainment shows” (p.158). Another two indices were designed in personal terms to indicate a media user’s interaction with a serial character and a quiz program host. According to the researchers, with the application of the six indices, the research seemed to have a relatively high reliability. However, details about how the researchers got the reliability and how they constructed such a multi-dimensional scale were not clearly provided, which makes it difficult for other researchers to repeat the study. In studying older people’s para-social interaction when watching TV news, Levy (1979) developed a 42-item scale to measure how strong the para-social interaction is with local news broadcasters. The measure scale did help the research to develop some new perspectives in this area. One of the perspectives was the direct relationship between joking among newscasters and para-social interaction. Another one was the inverse relationship between education and para-social interaction. In spite of these findings, the validity and reliability of the research are suspect because the research measurements were not repeated extensively.

It was not until 1985 that the standard measure scale for para-social interaction was proposed by Rubin, Perse, and Powell. It was based on a 29-item survey conducted among 329 subjects; when Rubin, Perse, and Powell analyzed the data, a 20-item measure scale was generated through factor analysis with a high internal reliability ($\alpha = .93$) and a single factor explaining 45.7% of the variance. This measurement was replicated by some following studies, such as para-social interaction with TV shopping anchors (Grant, Guthrie, & Ball-Rokeach, 1991), or comedians (Auter, 1992), or different television performers (Turner, 1993). In fact, Rubin and Perse reduced their 20-item measurement to a 10-item version in their later study (1987), which also had a high internal reliability ($\alpha = .88$) and a high
correlation with the previous version. The revised measure scale was widely applied as well, such as TV viewing motivations in 1991 (Conway & Rubin). However, the two scales were criticized for their univariate nature. In other words, they only measured the identity aspect of para-social interaction (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000).

Arguing that para-social interaction should not be described by a single factor solution, Gleich (1997) conducted a study through a three-factor solution, including companionship representing media users’ needs for social interaction, person-program interaction representing content related interaction, and empathetic interaction representing some affective and behavioral reactions of media users. The advantage of this measure scale is that the combination of the three factors would be able to explain most of the variance. Moreover, another multidimensional measure scale which seemed more advanced was claimed by Auter and Palmgreen (2000). Based on a 47-item open-ended survey, this scale was further reduced to 35 items, and later 22 items with an alpha of .84. The Audience-Persona Interaction Scale they proposed entails four factors: Identification with Favorite Character, such as “I seem to have the same beliefs or attitudes as my favorite character from the show I just watched”; Interest in Favorite Character, such as “I would watch the actor on another program”; Group Identification/Interaction (feeling a part of the TV “family” group), such as “I’d enjoy interacting with the characters from the show I just watched and my friends at the same time”; and Favorite Character Problem Solving Abilities, such as “I wish I could handle the problems as well as my favorite character from the show I just watched”.

When para-social interaction was related to celebrity idolization, more measure scales were designed. A 22-item multidimensional measure scale (McCutchen, Lange, & Houran, 2002) was developed to assess the preferable way to worship a celebrity by media users: entertainment-social, intense-social, or borderline-pathological. Further, the 60-item Fan
Activities Scale (Cupach & Spitzberg) developed in 1994 was more concerned about media users’ pursuit behaviors in celebrity worship, with one of the questions being whether the fan would want to go to or wait at the person’s hotel. Meanwhile, the Need for Entertainment Scale, consisting of 16 items, was developed by Brock and Livingston (2004) to assess whether media users thirst for entertainment activity or consider it a waste of time.

To conclude, measurement for para-social interaction has become more advanced as our understanding of this research area improves. From the methods stated above, we can learn, firstly, that before the application of a certain measure scale we must determine whether the research focuses more on para-social interaction itself, or the person engaging in para-social interaction, or the person’s desire. While the Audience-Persona Interaction Scale might be more suitable for measuring para-social interaction as a process, the Need for Entertainment scale might be a better choice for assessing media users’ perceptions during such a process. Secondly, considering the dimensions analyzed earlier in this paper and the variety of extant research methods, we can predict that if a proper approach is used to measure a certain dimension, the reliability of the research might be relatively higher. A good illustration of this would be the 60-item Fan Activities Scale. Since most of the items in this scale are about fans’ pursuit behaviors, other measure scales might not reveal such a dimension as salient as this one. Thirdly, although the Likert-scale is used in most of the relevant research, other types of scales do exist, such as Semantic Differential Scale, which was used in Auter and Davis’s research (1991) about “when characters speak directly to viewers.” Additionally, some researchers adopt qualitative methods instead of the most commonly used quantitative methods, such as content analysis of soap opera viewers’ letters done by Sood and Rogers (2000).

Measures
A 5-point Likert scale with range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was applied to all evaluative items in this survey.

_Para-social interaction._ Para-social interaction scale in this survey was adapted from the trimmed-down version of the standard measure scale for para-social interaction designed by Rubin and Perse (1987). As is mentioned above, this measurement had a relatively high reliability and validity. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement to the 14 statements, such as “If my favorite media character appeared on another TV program, I would watch that program,” “I see my favorite media character as a natural down-to-earth person,” “I would like to meet my favorite media character in person,” “I feel sorry for my favorite media character when he or she makes a mistake,” and “My favorite media character keeps me company when I am lonely.”

_Identification._ Participants’ identification with their favorite media character(s) was measured by the ten items suggested by Cohen (2001), which was based on previous measurement for identification and the four central dimensions of identification proposed by Cohen (2001): empathy, cognitive aspect, motivational aspect, and absorption. Participants were asked to express their agreement with items such as “While viewing my favorite TV program, I could feel the emotions my favorite character portrayed,” and “When my favorite character succeeded I felt joy, but when he or she failed, I was sad.”

_Similarity._ Although the _Perceived Homophily Measure_ developed by McCroskey, Richmond and Daly (1975) was applied widely to assess perceived similarity between media users and media characters, the _background similarity_ subscale of the measure had low reliability for both male and female characters in the original study. It included facets regarding participants’ social class, economic situation, status, and background. In this survey, however, participants’ age and gender were the only background elements assessed.
in the similarity scale: “I prefer media characters similar to my age level,” and “I prefer same sex media characters”. Nevertheless, similarities between media users and media characters are not limited to demographics, but in terms of behavior as well. That is why an item related to people’s behavior was adapted from the attitude similarity subscale of the Perceived Homophily Measure (McCroskey et al., 1975), that is, “I find myself behaving in a similar manner to my favorite character on some occasions.” Seven other items were based on Auter and Palmgreen’s Audience-Persona Interaction Scale (2000). The wording was slightly adjusted for the present study. For example, “My favorite character reminds me of myself” was adapted from “My favorite character from the show I just watched reminds me of myself”; “My favorite character and I have some similar qualities” was adapted from “I have the same qualities as my favorite character from the show I just watched”; and “The interaction among characters in my favorite program is similar to mine with friends/family” was adapted from the combination of “The characters from the show I just watched interactions similar to mine with friends” and “The characters from the show I just watched interactions similar to mine with family”.

Affinity/Liking. The liking/affinity measure was a 7-item scale assessing participants’ level of adoration and perception of closeness with their favorite media character(s). The scale included items such as “I would like to have a friendly chat with my favorite character,” and “I find my favorite character very attractive physically”, which were adapted from the measurement for social attraction developed by McCroskey and McCain (1974). The scale also included the item “I’d enjoy interacting with my favorite character and my friends at the same time”, which was adapted from the Audience-Persona Interaction Scale (Auter & Palmgreen, 2001); and the item “I enjoy watching, reading, or listening to my favorite celebrity because it means a good time”, which was adapted from the Celebrity
Attitude Scale (McCutchen, Lange, & Houran, 2002). In addition, three other items were added, such as “I hope my favorite character would appear more often”.

Imitation. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on nine statements with regard to imitation. Six items were adapted from the Connectedness Scale designed by Russell, Norman and Heckler (2004). They were statements straddling two dimensions: imitation such as “I imitate the gestures and facial expressions from the characters in my favorite program”, and modeling such as “I get ideas from my favorite program about how to interact in my own life”. The other three items were developed from Auter and Palmgreen’s (2000) Favorite Character Problem Solving Abilities subscale in the Audience-Persona Interaction Scale, including “I wish I could handle problems as well as my favorite character,” “I like the way my favorite character handles problems,” and “I would like to be more like my favorite character.”
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

A total of 150 students at a Southeastern university were recruited from an introductory mass communication course. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 35 years, with an average of 21. Of them, 54.7% were female and 45.3% were male. The sample was overwhelmingly White/Caucasian (88.7%), with 8.7% Black/African American, and 2.7% identified themselves as “others”. The vast majority of the participants were single (96%), with 2% engaged and 1.3% married, and one person did not report the marital status. The sample included 35.3% freshmen, 29.3% sophomores, 22.0% juniors, and 13.3% seniors.

Participants were also asked to estimate average television viewing in a given week. A little more than half (55.3%) indicated 5 to 9 hours, 22.7% indicated 0 to 4 hours, and 22.0% indicated 10 or more. As for time spent on favorite program in a given week, most participants (74%, n = 111) indicated 0 to 3 hour(s), 20.7% (n = 31) indicated 4 to 6 hours, 4.7% (n = 7) indicated 7 to 10 hours, and only 1 participant (.7%) indicated more than 10 hours. In other words, 26% (n = 39) chose 4 or more than 4 hours for favorite program in a given week.

The five measure scales employed in this survey all registered acceptable reliability: para-social interaction ($\alpha = .81$), identification ($\alpha = .88$), affinity/liking ($\alpha = .77$), similarity ($\alpha = .87$), and imitation ($\alpha = .87$).

The first set of hypotheses assessed the correlation between para-social interaction and identification, affinity/liking, similarity, and imitation. Since frequency of exposure was always considered an important predictor of media consumption, the variable (average
television viewing hours in a given week) was controlled when partial correlation analyses were conducted. Table 1 shows that para-social interaction did have high positive associations with identification ($r = .74$), affinity/liking ($r = .74$), similarity ($r = .51$), and imitation ($r = .50$). Furthermore, the correlations between para-social interaction and identification/affinity/liking were relatively higher than those between para-social interaction and similarity/imitation.

Table 1. Correlations among Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Para-social interaction</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.74***</td>
<td>.51***</td>
<td>.74***</td>
<td>.50***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. identification</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.44***</td>
<td>.69***</td>
<td>.49***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Similarity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.43***</td>
<td>.58***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Affinity/Liking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.49***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Imitation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** $p < .001$

The second set of hypotheses predicted that there would be a positive association between age and the five interactive phenomena in the media, respectively. Participants aged from 18 to 21 were categorized as group 1; participants aged above 21 were categorized as group 2. The results (see Table 2) illustrate that participants of the two groups had no statistically significant difference in para-social interaction ($p > .05$), identification ($p > .05$), affinity/liking ($p > .05$), similarity ($p > .05$), and imitation($p > .05$).

Table 2. Differences between the Two Age Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Group 1 ($n = 121$)</th>
<th>Group 2 ($n = 28$)</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scale</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Para-social interaction</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affinity/Liking</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imitation</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.
The first research question asked whether participants’ para-social interaction, identification, affinity/liking, similarity, and imitation differed by gender. Table 3 shows that female participants \((M = 3.53, SD = .49)\) had stronger para-social interaction \([t (144) = 2.18, p < .05]\) than male participants \((M = 3.36, SD = .48)\), and that female participants \((M = 3.70, SD = .61)\) had stronger affinity/liking of favorite media characters \([t (145) = 4.58, p < .05]\) than male participants \((M = 3.25, SD = .59)\). However, there is no statistically significant difference between female participants and male participants in identification, similarity, and imitation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Female group ((n = 82))</th>
<th>Male group ((n = 68))</th>
<th>(df)</th>
<th>(t)</th>
<th>(p)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Para-social interaction</td>
<td>3.53 .49</td>
<td>3.36 .48</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>.03*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>3.60 .64</td>
<td>3.45 .58</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affinity/Liking</td>
<td>3.70 .61</td>
<td>3.25 .59</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>.00*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity</td>
<td>3.23 .65</td>
<td>3.36 .52</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>-1.29</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imitation</td>
<td>3.00 .79</td>
<td>3.13 .68</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>-1.12</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* \(p < .05\).

The second research question asked if participants’ general exposure levels resulted in differences in their para-social interaction, identification, affinity/liking, similarity, and imitation. Participants were divided into three groups based on their responses about general viewing levels. Participants who chose 0 to 4 as average viewing hour(s) in a given week were classified as group 1; participants who chose 5 to 9 hours were classified as group 2; and those who chose 10 or more hours belonged to group 3. The results (see Table 4) show that there was a significant difference in para-social interaction among the three groups \([F (2, 147) = 4.07, p < .05]\); there was also a significant difference in imitation among the three groups \([F (2, 147) = 3.13, p < .05]\). However, there was no significant difference in
identification \( F(2, 147) = 1.94, p = .15 \); affinity/liking \( F(2, 147) = .64, p = .53 \); and similarity \( F(2, 147) = 2.55, p = .08 \).

Table 4. Analysis of Variance by General Exposure Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>( df )</th>
<th>Sum of squares</th>
<th>Mean squares</th>
<th>( F )</th>
<th>( p )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Para-social interaction</strong> ( (n = 150) )</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between groups</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>.02*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within groups</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>33.71</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>35.58</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Identification** \( (n = 150) \) |         |                |              |        |       |
| Between groups         | 2       | 1.45           | .73          | 1.94   | .15   |
| Within groups          | 147     | 55.04          | .37          |        |       |
| Total                  | 149     | 56.49          |              |        |       |

| **Affinity/Liking** \( (n = 150) \) |         |                |              |        |       |
| Between groups         | 2       | .53            | .26          | .64    | .53   |
| Within groups          | 147     | 61.01          | .42          |        |       |
| Total                  | 149     | 61.54          |              |        |       |

| **Similarity** \( (n = 150) \) |         |                |              |        |       |
| Between groups         | 2       | 1.78           | .89          | 2.55   | .08   |
| Within groups          | 147     | 51.18          | .35          |        |       |
| Total                  | 149     | 52.96          |              |        |       |

| **Imitation** \( (n = 150) \) |         |                |              |        |       |
| Between groups         | 2       | 3.34           | 1.67         | 3.13   | .046* |
| Within groups          | 147     | 78.36          | .53          |        |       |
| Total                  | 149     | 81.70          |              |        |       |

\*\( p < .05 \).

Table 5. Post Hoc Analysis of Variance by General Exposure Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PSI</td>
<td>3.27 (.43)</td>
<td>3.47 (.53)</td>
<td>3.60 (.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>3.38 (.67)</td>
<td>3.54 (.64)</td>
<td>3.67 (.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affinity/Liking</td>
<td>3.39 (.60)</td>
<td>3.54 (.71)</td>
<td>3.52 (.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity</td>
<td>3.14 (.67)</td>
<td>3.29 (.62)</td>
<td>3.46 (.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imitation</td>
<td>2.81 (.75)</td>
<td>3.08 (.75)</td>
<td>3.25 (.64)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Means that do not share subscripts differ at \( p < .05 \). Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.*

Furthermore, post hoc analyses (see Table 5) show that there was a significant difference between group 1 and group 2 \( (p = .048) \), and between group 1 and group 3 \( (p \)
= .01), but not between group 2 and group 3 (p = .17) in para-social interaction; and, there was a significant difference between group 1 and group 3 (p = .02), but not between group 1 and group 2 (p = .07), or between group 2 and group 3 (p = .27) in imitation.

The third research question asked if participants’ para-social interaction, identification, affinity/liking, similarity, and imitation differed according to favorite program exposure levels. Participants were divided into two groups according to their reported exposure levels to favorite programs. Most participants (n = 111) reported 0 to 3 hour(s) as their answers, thus, they were identified as group 1. Others (n = 39) were identified as group 2, who spent more than 3 hours in a given week on their favorite TV programs. As shown in table 6, participants with high favorite program exposure levels (M = 3.37, SD = .69) reported stronger imitation scores [t (70) = -3.21, p < .05] than those with low favorite program exposure levels (M = 2.95, SD = .73). But for the four other interactive phenomena, there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups.

Table 6. Analysis of Variance by Favorite Program Exposure Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Group 1 (n = 111)</th>
<th>Group 2 (n = 39)</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Para-social interaction</td>
<td>3.41 .48</td>
<td>3.57 .51</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>-1.77</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>3.51 .61</td>
<td>3.61 .62</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>-.88</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affinity/Liking</td>
<td>3.46 .66</td>
<td>3.60 .60</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>-1.19</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity</td>
<td>3.24 .57</td>
<td>3.42 .64</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>-1.66</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imitation</td>
<td>2.95 .73</td>
<td>3.37 .69</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>-3.21</td>
<td>.00*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study was designed to investigate correlations among various media involvements, especially between para-social interaction and other important interactive phenomena in the media. Impacts of other relevant aspects, including age, gender, and exposure levels, were also examined to provide additional support for the analyses. Unlike much prior research in this area, which generally focused on one or two of the interactive phenomena, the present study provided basic information about relationships among five different types of media involvements. Furthermore, the diversity of the comparison dimensions could lead to more systematic and explicit conceptualizations and operationalizations of each of these interactive phenomena.

The survey data fully corroborated the first set of hypotheses that para-social interaction was positively associated with identification, affinity/liking, similarity, and imitation. In addition, para-social interaction and identification/affinity/liking had higher correlations than those between para-social interaction and similarity/imitation. It was possible that para-social interaction and identification/affinity/liking shared more similarities. In Tian and Hoffner (2007)’s study, education, perceived similarity, and social attraction were significant predictors of both para-social interaction and identification. In the present study, the whole sample had very high homogeneity as participants in the survey shared many similar properties, such as major and age. It is also possible that, as is analyzed in the section of “identification”, identification is a function or effect of para-social interaction (McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972). As for affinity/liking, its higher correlations with para-social
interaction and identification are consistent with several other relevant studies. It could be a predictor of para-social interaction (Rubin, 1985), a component of identification (Liebes & Katz, 1990), or an outcome of identification (Cohen, 2001). In addition, it has been demonstrated that affinity/liking was highly related to media users’ motives to engage in a para-social interaction (Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

The second set of hypotheses claimed that the older age groups would have stronger para-social interaction, identification, affinity/liking, similarity, and imitation. This hypothesis was not supported, probably because of the homogeneity of the participants. In the sample, about 121 participants were 18 to 21 years old; only 28 participants were more than 21 years old, in which 25 participants belonged to the 22 to 25 years group, 2 participants belonged to the 26 to 29 years groups, and only 1 participant belonged to the 30 to 35 age group. Thus, age might not have enough variance to predict any dependent measure significantly.

The first research question was concerned about media users’ gender and how it may impact their para-social interaction, identification, affinity/liking, similarity, and imitation. The differences between females and males were only found in para-social interaction and affinity/liking, which were higher for female participants. This may due to the differences of preferable human needs of the two genders, which was in line with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. In explaining people’s social needs, examples related to people’s age were given. One of the examples was Levy’s study (1979), which proved that the aged viewers had higher para-social interaction than young viewers. According to Maslow (1943), it was because aged viewers generally felt lonelier than young viewer, and they need more companionship.

For the same reason, that female participants in this study had greater para-social interaction was probably because of their certain group needs and tendencies. According to
Hutson-Comeaux and Kelly (2002), males are primarily more concerned with performance and achievement, whereas women pay more attention to social relationships. Para-social interaction is an important alternative social relationship, and affinity/liking of media characters are related to motives and likelihood of para-social interaction and fandom (Cohen & Perse, 2003). Therefore, both of them can satisfy the higher social needs of women. It was also possibly because that women were more likely than men to reveal their feelings and emotions, for the most part.

On the other hand, media users are not able to tell the distinctions between themselves and media figures during identification; the basic nature of similarity is judgment and comparison; and imitation focuses more on emulation rather than social relationships, as a result, they cannot satisfy women’s social needs as well as para-social interaction and affinity/liking do. Therefore, in order to attract female audiences, certain technology or specific media content which are highly useful in evoking para-social interaction and affinity/liking should be utilized by program designers.

The relationships between the five interactive phenomena in the media and frequency of exposure to general TV programs or favorite program were also examined. For para-social interaction, there was a significant difference between participants who watched television more than four hours and those who spent less time in a given week. This corresponded to the uncertainty reduction theory. The theory defines the relationship between two individuals as a process of exploration. In this process, people need to go through one stage after another to know each other. As the process moves on, an individual’s uncertainty towards another person decreases. The final stage of this process is a decision, such as continuing or ending the relationship (Berger, 1979). Therefore, length of acquaintance is an important element in building para-social relationship. As time goes by, the relationship between media users and
media characters grows, during which media users will have different judgments and make different decisions, such as treating a media character as a real friend.

However, length of acquaintance was not a significant predictor for identification. As explained by Cohen (2001, 2006), identification is taking place during viewing, more of a temporary experience, while para-social interaction goes beyond this limitation. That was why some researchers (Tian & Hoffner, 2007) claimed that as a longer-term experience, para-social interaction would probably have stronger impacts on media users than identification. This may also explain why no significant correlation was found between frequency of exposure and identification, but between frequency of exposure and para-social interaction.

The significant difference was also found in imitation, especially when it was related to participants with extreme high exposure levels, compared to low exposure levels. As the frequency of exposure increased, participants’ desire to imitate their favorite characters increased, whether it was related to general TV viewing or favorite media program viewing. Corresponded with the proposition and explanation of the behavioral dimension of the model designed for para-social interaction, imitation was a post-viewing behavior. The frequency-level highly related variable in this survey, imitation, was probably one of the most obtrusive longer-term influence of para-social interaction proposed by Tian & Hoffner (2007). This research finding might help us to understand and control media violence phenomenon among adolescents argued by some people. In other words, to minimize the possibility of TV viewers’ imitation when the content is related to violence, the level of exposure should be controlled.

However, no significant distinction was found among different viewing levels in affinity/liking, or similarity. It was almost impossible to find correlations between viewing
levels and affinity/liking in this survey, because all the items in the survey were about participants’ favorite media characters and favorite media programs. Based on the same reason, participants were already familiar with the targeted media characters and media programs, and already had clear judgments about them. This explained why participants in the survey did not change their opinions about similarities between themselves and their favorite media characters as the frequency levels changed.

The survey also asked the participants to identify their favorite media programs and media characters. Answers to this question were considerably diversified. The media programs span a variety of genres; the media characters span different kinds of fields. This suggests that para-social interaction is apparently a function of different personalities and exposure patterns and that future research should look at other interesting variables related to the viewer.

Limitations of the study could not be overlooked. Although college students were a group of media-savvy persons, which made the survey easy to conduct, the external validity of this research was diminished by the same characteristic. In other words, it might be problematic to generalize the survey results to other media users. The homogeneity of the participants was another limitation of the test, such as the impact of participant’s ages on the effectiveness of the second set of hypotheses.

This was a preliminary study on correlations among diversified interactive phenomena in the media. Similar perspectives could be applied to analyze media involvements in many other relevant studies, such as the relationship among social interaction, para-social interaction, imagination, and so on. Further studies could also explore the cause-and-effect links among these phenomena, but not limited to simple correlations. As for how media
users’ human needs, demographics, personalities, and mentality influence the correlations among these media involvements, further investigations are badly needed.
REFERENCES


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Raney, A. A. (2006). The psychology of disposition-based theories of media enjoyment. In J. Bryant & P. Vorderer (Eds.), *The psychology of entertainment* (pp. 137-150).


Psychology Bulletin, 21, 975-986.


APPENDIX

Please rate your agreement to the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>My favorite media character makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>If my favorite media character appeared on another TV program, I would watch that program.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I see my favorite media character as a natural down-to-earth person.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>My favorite media character seems to understand the kinds of things I want to know.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>If I saw my favorite media character in a newspaper or magazine I would read it.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I would like to meet my favorite media character in person.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I feel sorry for my favorite media character when he or she makes a mistake.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>My favorite media character keeps me company when I am lonely.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I would rather watch my favorite program than watch anything else on TV.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Whenever I am unable to watch my favorite TV program, I really miss it.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Watching my favorite TV program is one of the more important things I do each day.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>My favorite TV program lets me see how other people live.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>My favorite TV program helps me understand some of the problems other people have.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>My favorite TV program presents things as they really are in life.</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
15. While viewing my favorite TV program, I felt as if I was part of the action.  

16. While viewing my favorite TV program, I forgot myself and was fully absorbed.  

17. I was able to understand the events in my favorite TV program in a manner similar to that in which my favorite character understood them.  

18. I think I have a good understanding of my favorite character.  

19. I tend to understand the reasons why my favorite character does what he/she does.  

20. While viewing my favorite TV program, I could feel the emotions my favorite character portrayed.  

21. During viewing, I felt I could really get inside my favorite character's head.  

22. At key moments in my favorite TV program, I felt I knew exactly what my favorite character was going through.  

23. While viewing my favorite TV program, I wanted my favorite character to succeed in achieving his or her goals.  

24. When my favorite character succeeded I felt joy, but when he or she failed, I was sad.  

Please rate your agreement to the following:

25. My favorite character reminds me of myself.  

26. My favorite character and I have some similar qualities.  

27. I prefer media characters similar to my age level.  

28. I prefer same sex media characters.  

29. My favorite character and I seem to share some similar beliefs or attitudes.  

30. I usually agreed with my favorite character.  

31. I have some problem that is similar to that
of my favorite character.

<p>| | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32. I find myself behaving in a similar manner to my favorite character on some occasions.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. The interaction among characters in my favorite program is similar to mine with friends/family.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. My friends are somewhat like characters from my favorite program.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please rate your agreement to the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35. I would like to have a friendly chat with my favorite character.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. I find my favorite character very attractive physically.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. I’d enjoy interacting with my favorite character and my friends at the same time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. I feel sad when a tragedy happens to my favorite character.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. If something bad happens to my favorite character, I hope I can do something to help him/her.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. I hope my favorite character would appear more often.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>41. I enjoy watching, reading, or listening to my favorite celebrity because it means a good time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please rate your agreement to the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>42. I wish I could handle problems as well as my favorite character.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43. I like the way my favorite character handles problems.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44. I would like to be more like my favorite character.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>45. Sometimes I learn how to handle real life situations from media characters in my favorite program.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46. I imitate the gestures and facial</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
expressions from the characters in my favorite program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>47. I find myself saying phrases from my favorite program when I interact with other people.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48. Sometimes I try to speak like my favorite character.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49. I get ideas from my favorite program about how to interact in my own life.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50. I relate what happens in my favorite program to my own life.</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please circle one answer for each of the following questions:


2. Gender: Female  Male

3. Race: White  African-American  Hispanic  Others

4. Household income: $0-$29,999  $30,000-$69,000  $70,000-$99,000  $100,000+

5. Marital status: Single  Engaged  Married  Divorced  Separated

6. Year in School: Freshman  Sophomore  Junior  Senior  Masters  PhD

7. On average, how much television do you watch in a given week? 0-4 hrs  5-9 hrs  10+ hrs

8. On average, how many hours do you spend in watching your favorite program in a given week? 0-3 hrs  4-6 hrs  7-10 hrs  10+ hrs

9. Please name your favorite TV programs (limit three), if any.

________________________________________________________________________

10. Identify your favorite characters in those programs (limit three), if any.

________________________________________________________________________