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Young women's attachment style and interpersonal engagement with female TV stars

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———————————— ABSTRACT ————————————

The present study builds on an emerging body of research that finds adult attachment style predictive of interpersonal engagement with fictional media personas in ways that are congruent to patterns that emerge in real life relationships. Results of a questionnaire study indicate that a preoccupied attachment style among college women is associated with increased idealization of a favorite female character's behavior and physical appearance. Additionally, the desire to look like a favorite female character was greatest for women selecting thin characters, while perceived similarity to a character's appearance was greatest for those selecting average weight characters. The psychological motivation behind such media involvement and its potential impact on the emotional well being of anxiously attached young women are discussed.

KEY WORDS: attachment style • idealization • identification • para-social relationships • thin ideal • TV characters • women

All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dara N. Greenwood, Department of Communication Studies, University of Michigan, 1225 South University, Ann Arbor, MI 48104, USA [e-mail: dgreenwd@umich.edu]. Larry Erbert was the Action Editor on this article.

We are often loathe to admit feelings of intense interpersonal connection with media icons for fear of being stigmatized as obsessed fans. However, this reluctance can belie the very real social and emotional experience that interacting with media icons can afford. A few scholars have recognized that media personas do indeed represent an emotionally compelling social group that can offer individuals "intimacy at a distance" (Horton & Wohl, 1956), imagined friendship or parasocial interaction (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985), and "ontological security" (Cohen & Metzger, 1998; Silverstone, 1993) as well as providing individuals with role models for identification and/or idealization (Caughey, 1984; Harrison, 1997). Importantly, a handful of researchers also have begun to explore individual differences in the psychological motivations that may lead to increased emotional connections with media figures.

An emerging body of research (Cohen, 1997, 2004; Cole & Leets, 1999) has utilized attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973) to understand individuals' emotional and social connection with favorite media characters. This work suggests that a preoccupied attachment style (one characterized by a chronic preoccupation with close relationships) is associated with increased intensity of imagined closeness with favorite television characters. Individuals with a preoccupied attachment style are also likely to use other people as idealized mirrors for the self (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2004); however, to date no one has assessed whether media figures might serve as particularly appealing mirrors for these individuals. In addition to replicating existing research on attachment style and parasocial interaction, this study aims to clarify whether young women with a preoccupied attachment style report more intense idealization of and identification with favorite media characters relative to their less anxious or more avoidant counterparts. It is important to understand who may be most vulnerable to perceiving media icons as both role models and proxies for the self because the more attractive and self-relevant a media model is perceived to be, the more likely that viewers may attempt to emulate them in ways that are not always beneficial or healthy. Indeed, idealization of and/or identification with a media character have been found to predict increased eating disorder symptomatology in the case of glamorous female media icons (Harrison, 1997; Thomsen, McCoy, Gustafson, & Williams, 2002) or aggressive behavior, in the case of aggressive media characters (Greenwood, 2007; Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003) among media consumers.

Attachment theory: A brief background

Attachment theory was developed originally as a way of understanding the close bonds between infants and their caregivers and how such bonds are maintained. Bowlby (1973) proposed that children internalize representations of themselves in relation to close others that indicate the extent to which children believe that they are worthy, valued individuals and expect that close others will be available and responsive to their needs. Furthermore,

caregivers who are sensitive and responsive help infants to regulate their feelings of distress, enabling them to experience an emotional sense of well being or "felt security" (Sroufe & Waters, 1977). Recent extensions of attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003) have described how these processes apply to adult close relationships. While developmental, clinical and social psychologists continue to debate the extent to which adult attachment styles are consistent with childhood attachment patterns, researchers have provided persuasive theoretical and empirical evidence to support that the attachment system – ideally designed for proximity seeking in times of need, and protest in times of separation– seems to have been adaptively co-opted for pair bonding in adults (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Moreover, researchers have identified three or four styles of attachment patterns in adults that are similar to the various secure and insecure patterns observed in children (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998).

Adult attachment style has been operationalized in terms of two dimensions that focus on anxiety about and avoidance of intimate relationships (Brennan et al., 1998). Individuals reporting high anxiety about but low avoidance of close relationships fit a preoccupied attachment profile (i.e., desire for intimacy but fear of abandonment, also referred to as anxious ambivalence); those reporting high avoidance but low anxiety about relationships fit a dismissing avoidance profile (i.e., avoid intimacy and desire autonomy); those high on both avoidance and anxiety fit a fearful avoidance profile (i.e., desire intimacy but fear of rejection); and those low on both anxiety and avoidance fit a secure profile (i.e., desire both intimacy and autonomy).

These different attachment patterns may reflect the degree to which the need for "felt security" is activated, and the extent to which interpersonal relationships are used in the service of regulating this need (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). For example, those with preoccupied and fearful avoidant styles (i.e., high in attachment anxiety) may experience a more chronically activated attachment system. Having less stable and less positive views of self, they may interpret many situations as threatening to their esteem (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). Preoccupied individuals may respond to their chronic anxiety by seeking reassurance from close others. Consistent with this idea, individuals with a preoccupied attachment style have been found to value their interactions partners more when those partners provide them with self-regulatory assistance (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2006). Although attachment theorists have focused mainly on the degree to which anxious ambivalent individuals use actual others in the service of obtaining "felt security," new evidence suggests that imagined others, such as those found in the mass media, also may be used in the interest of attachment needs.

Attachment and parasocial relationships

Parasocial interaction was first described by Horton and Wohl (1956) to refer to the seeming psychological and social closeness that viewers began to cultivate with their favorite television performers over time. This concept was later elaborated into a self-report scale (Rubin et al., 1985) that measures the extent to which individuals tend to think of their favorite characters as if they were "an old friend" among other items (e.g. "I like hearing the voice of my favorite TV personality in my home;" "I miss seeing my favorite TV personality when his or her program is not on"). Because the parasocial interaction scale taps perceived intimacy as well as proximity-seeking goals and feelings, it is fitting that researchers have begun studying the association between adult attachment styles and intensity of parasocial bonds. Further, as Reeves and Nass (1996) have noted,

> Modern media now engages old brains ... There is no switch in the brain that can be thrown to distinguish between the real and mediated worlds. People respond to simulations of social actors and natural objects as if they were in fact social, and in fact, natural. (p. 12)

This idea has also been echoed more recently by Kanazawa (2002) who made an evolutionary argument for how we are virtually wired to respond to television characters as if they are our "friends." Thus, we have reason to believe that individuals respond to fictional characters in ways that are emotionally analogous to how they respond to real life others.

As might be expected from an anxious ambivalent individuals' relative preoccupation with real-life relationships, these individuals also report more intense feelings for a favorite character than either securely attached or avoidant individuals (Cohen, 1997, 2004; Cole & Leets, 1999). Researchers note that television characters may provide anxious-ambivalent individuals with reliable, if illusory, feelings of intimacy they crave in their real-life relationships (Cole & Leets, 1999). Interestingly, and in line with the characterization that anxiously attached individuals are more sensitive and vigilant to the threat of relationship loss, Cohen (2004) found that anxious attachment was associated with anticipating negative reactions to a hypothetical loss or break-up with a favorite media character (e.g., "if [their] favorite character were to be taken off the air"; p. 195). The existing evidence suggests that fictional characters operate well within the range of lived emotional experience, and that affinity or fictional characters can be predicted by the chronic relational tendencies that are captured by attachment style. However, interpersonal engagement with a fictional character may offer individuals more than just an imagined friend.

Attachment and identification/idealization

In addition to providing a direct means of obtaining felt security by functioning as surrogate attachment figures or friends, media characters may

also provide felt security indirectly, by enabling vicarious identification with highly valued icons. The need to feel identified with an idealized other has been described as a pivotal stage in infant development; Mikulincer and Shaver (2004) emphasized the relevance of this phenomenon to attachment patterns, referring to Kohut's (1971) mirror/ideal conceptualization to describe how

> an attachment figure who fulfills idealization needs and serves as an ideal role model for identification facilitates the transfer of desirable caregiving traits into a representations of self-caregiving … [and] an attachment figure who provides mirroring experiences (e.g., describing and celebrating the child's desirable, admirable traits and achievements) facilitates the integration of the-self-with-an-attachment-figure into the actual self. (p. 189).

As noted earlier, the degree to which stability exists between childhood and adulthood attachment styles is the subject of ongoing empirical inquiry. However, a review of recent meta-analytic and longitudinal work on attachment patterns concludes that "early attachment patterns manifest themselves in some shape or form across diverse developmental periods … even if the degree to which those patterns manifest themselves is minor" (Fraley & Brumbaugh, 2004, p. 121). Thus it is plausible to imagine that some kind of template for attachment endures into adulthood, however faint or subject to contextual influence. Individuals with insecure attachment styles, such as anxious ambivalent adults, may have failed to internalize a secure sense of self due to failed mirroring and idealizing interactions with a caregiver. This idea may explain the tendency of anxious ambivalent adults to be overly reliant on close others' feedback and may explain why their positive or negative feelings about themselves depend heavily on the perceptions of others (Bartholomew, 1990; Brennan & Bosson, 1998).

The mass media may allow insecurely attached individuals the soothing pleasure of assimilating with an idealized counterpart. In fact, Horton and Wohl (1956) described parasocial relationships with media characters as a phenomenon that "may … constitute an exploration and development of new role possibilities … an idealized version of an everyday performance – a 'successful' para-social approximation of an ideal pattern, not often, perhaps never, achieved in real life" (p. 222).

Anxious attachment and appearance idealization

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argued that the degree to which women, more than men, experience anxiety and vigilance about their physical appearance may be conceptualized as a relatively adaptive response to the powerful social norms that conflate physical attractiveness with women's social value. They document associations between increased adherence to standardized norms of attractiveness and academic, occupational and social benefits. Given that preoccupation with appearance may be considered a normative, if toxic, tendency for women in our society, women with a

preoccupied attachment style may be particularly vulnerable to gendered prescriptions for physical attractiveness if achieving such an ideal offers the promise of secure attachment bonds. Indeed, much research suggests that anxious attachment is associated with increased body image dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptomatology (Cash, Thériault, & Annis, 2004; Ward, Ramsay, & Treasure, 2000), increased propensity toward cosmetic surgeries (Davis & Vernon, 2002), and an increased tendency to stake self-worth in one's physical attractiveness (Park, Crocker, & Mickelson, 2004). The media provide young women with an endless array of attractive and valued icons, and often explicitly encourage young women to adopt celebrity fashion and diet trends in order to be more like revered Hollywood starlets. (*In Style* magazine, which routinely interviews A-list actresses about their "top style secrets" (April 2007 cover) among 500 some pages of fashion and cosmetic advertisements, is a prime example.) Thus, anxiously attached women may strategically attend to and idealize these potential role models in order to gain social approval and attention.

Parasocial interaction, idealization and gender

Although parasocial interaction has not typically been operationalized in terms of idealization in general, nor appearance idealization in particular, there is some research that suggests that young women may consider the physical attractiveness of their favorite female media personas part and parcel of their overall affinity for that character. Hoffner (1996) found that, among young school children (aged 7–12), the perceived intelligence of a favorite male character predicted wishful identification (or what we call idealization) for boys but perceived physical attractiveness of a favorite female character predicted wishful identification for girls. Further, perceived physical attractiveness emerged as the only significant predictor of para-social interaction among girls while a host of other character traits also factored into boys' parasocial interactions.

Thus, it appears that at an early age, young girls have a hard time disso-ciating physical attractiveness from general appeal and likeability. Hoffner (1996) noted that her findings are in step with cultural norms about gender roles; indeed, the results are consistent with a developmental psychology literature that finds that although both young boys and girls tend to derive feelings of self-worth from perceptions of their appearance, young girls are more likely to report lower levels of attractiveness and self-worth than boys (Harter, 2003). Media characters may both model and perpetuate these cultural norms and hence become "super peers" (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005) for young girls in ways that may fuel existing anxieties and preoccupations.

The phenomenon of conflating parasocial affinity with appearance ideal-ization is not limited to the young. Harrison (1997) found that interpersonal attraction to thin media characters predicted body image concerns and dis-ordered eating symptoms among undergraduate females. However, because

her measure folded idealization, identification and emotional affinity into one construct and did not discriminate appearance idealization from more general behavioral idealization, it is difficult to determine which of these constructs was most robustly linked to problematic body image. The present research seeks to distinguish among these three different types of character-specific feelings. More importantly, the present work takes one theoretical step back and asks what relational motivations may predict young women's interpersonal engagement with same sex characters. In other words, *who* is most likely to perceive favorite female media characters as self-relevant, ideal and companionable?

The present study

The present study builds on and extends previous work (Cole & Leets, 1999; Harrison, 1997) by examining the specific links between women's attachment style and the degree to which they idealize and identify with favorite female celebrities, in addition to the extent to which they experience imagined friendship. While attachment style has been examined in the context of parasocial bonds as noted earlier, the present study is the first to explore attachment style in the context of young women's identification and ideal-ization of a same-sex media character. Knitting together the theoretical and empirical evidence that many of the interpersonal motivations relevant to real life relationships may also be relevant to parasocial relationships, the following specific hypotheses are advanced.

Because individuals with a preoccupied attachment style typically experi-ence more porous self–other boundaries and an increased desire to "merge with" close others (Brennan et al., 1998), perhaps owing to failed mirroring experiences in childhood as described earlier, it is expected that women with a preoccupied attachment style will be more likely to perceive favorite characters as similar to the self.

- *H1*: Women with high anxiety but low avoidance in close relationships (preoccupied women) will report the greatest behavioral identification with favorite same-sex characters.

Although we believe that women with a preoccupied attachment style will experience the characters' behavior as similar to the self, it is unclear whether they will also identify with an idealized characters' physical appear-ance. On the one hand, anxiously attached women might overestimate all traits (e.g., behavior and physical appearance) they might have in common with a favorite character. On the other hand, they may be acutely aware of the discrepancies that exist between an idealized character's physical appearance and their own. As noted earlier, anxiously attached women report increased appearance and body concerns than women with more secure relational styles which may foster unfavorable comparisons between the self and a media icon. Thus, we leave open the question:

- *RQ*: Do women with a preoccupied attachment style experience more or less appearance identification with a favorite female character?

Next, women who are preoccupied with their relationships also tend to idealize close others, upon whom they depend for emotion regulation and validation (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000), which leads us to

- *H2*: Women with a preoccupied attachment style will report greatest behavioral idealization of same-sex characters.

Along similar lines, because research has shown that women with a pre-occupied attachment style also show increased investment in their physical appearance (Davis & Vernon, 2002; Park et al., 2004), and because female media characters often embody a cultural ideal of attractiveness and inspire idealization from women with body concerns (Harrison, 1997),

- *H3*: Women with a preoccupied attachment style will report the greatest appearance idealization of a same-sex character.

To replicate previous work showing that preoccupied attachment style predicts increased parasocial interaction (Cohen, 1997; Cole & Leets, 1999), presumably due to the imagined intimacy and regulation function that characters may provide anxiously attached individuals,

- *H4*: (i) Women with a preoccupied attachment style will report greatest parasocial feelings (e.g., feeling like the character could be a close friend) and (ii) parasocial behavior (e.g., buying a magazine with that character on the cover).

A secondary aim of the present study is to provide substantive information about the body type of young women's favorite female characters and determine whether appearance idealization or identification tendencies are most pronounced for thin characters. The mass media tend to glorify and glamorize thin females – thin actresses are routinely praised in red carpet rituals, and thin female characters are not only over-represented on television programs but also receive verbal praise for their appearance, while their heavier female characters tend to be mocked or disparage themselves (Fouts & Burggraf, 1999, 2000). Therefore,

- *H5*: Women selecting thin characters (vs. average or heavy characters) will report increased appearance idealization of those characters.

Although thin characters may perpetuate and inspire idealization, we do not anticipate that they will inspire feelings of similarity in this domain. Women may be more able to realistically appraise their physical characteristics relative to the unrealistic standards that the media offers; hence

- *H6*: Women selecting "average" or heavy characters will report increased appearance identification compared to women who select thin characters.

Finally, it was also expected that character body type might differ as a function of attachment style. As noted earlier, because anxiously attached

young women tend to experience greater appearance anxiety than more securely attached women, it is reasonable to predict that they would be more drawn to same-sex media models who embody the current socio-cultural ideal. This leads to

- *H7*: The attachment anxiety of women choosing thin characters will be higher than the attachment anxiety of women choosing "average" or heavy characters. No difference is predicted for attachment avoidance.

Method

Participants
To increase the likelihood of obtaining adequate numbers of participants across the range of attachment anxiety and avoidance, participants were recruited from a prescreening questionnaire on the basis of their responses to Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) continuous measure of four attachment styles (secure, preoccupied, fearful-avoidant, and dismissing-avoidant). Participants read four attachment prototypes and rated the extent to which each prototype described their feelings in close relationships. Ratings were made on a scale ranging from 0 (Not at all descriptive of me) to 8 (Strongly descriptive of me). For example, the paragraph describing the secure proto-type states, "It is easy for me to be emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on others and having others depend on me. I don't worry about being alone or having others not accept me." For selection purposes, participants were assigned to the attachment style that was rated more highly than the other three styles. An attempt was made to recruit even numbers of participants endorsing each attachment style.

One hundred and thirty-three female participants comprised the original undergraduate sample at a large northeastern public university who volunteered for a study on "Media consumption." These participants were distributed among the four attachment categories such that 25% fell in the fearful avoidant category, 23% in the preoccupied category, 31% in the secure category, and 21% in the dismissing avoidant category. However, consistent with prior studies (Hoffner, 1996; Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005), just over half of this sample chose male characters as their favorite. Because the hypotheses focused on identification and idealization of favorite female characters only, we excluded the 62 women who chose males as favorite characters, leaving 65 participants for the purposes of the present study. The distribution of attachment styles based on categorical assignment was fairly similar for the group choosing female characters: 23% fearful avoidant, 23% preoccupied, 26% secure, and 28% dismissing avoidant; further, t-tests examining differences in each attachment dimension as a function of character gender reveal no significant differences.

Seventy-four per cent of participants were Caucasian, 6% were Hispanic American, 5% were Asian American, 3% were African American, and 3% were Native American. The remaining 9% failed to specify their ethnic identity.

Procedure

Participants completed the present study in two stages. First, they took part in a mass prescreening questionnaire that assessed their attachment style using two different measures (as described next). Second, they were recruited, on the basis of their attachment style, to come into the lab to complete a brief questionnaire on media affinities.

Measures

Attachment style. Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) measure of adult attachment was used only for recruitment purposes; for analytic purposes, we relied on the Experiences in Close Relationships measure of attachment anxiety and avoidance (Brennan et al., 1998). This 36-item continuous measure assesses both the anxiety and avoidance dimensions of adult attachment styles. The 18-item anxiety subscale ($\alpha = .91$) includes statements such as: I worry a lot about my relationships; I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner; I do not often worry about being abandoned (reverse scored). The 18-item avoidance subscale ($\alpha = .93$) includes statements such as: I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close; I prefer not to show my partner how I feel deep down; I feel comfortable depending on romantic partners (reverse scored). Responses were made on a 7-point Likert scale (0–6) ranging from "disagree strongly" to "agree strongly." Our analyses rely on this continuous measure of attachment because current research (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) suggests that adult attachment is best captured by measuring the dimensions of anxious-ambivalence and avoidance rather than assessing attachment in terms of categories.

Media affinity. Participants were asked to list the name and sex of their favorite character/actor (the latter choice was given in case the participant could only remember the fictional or non-fictional name) on television. Next, we assessed individuals' feelings of identification with, idealization of, and imagined closeness with these characters. Items were elaborated from Harrison's (1997) three interpersonal attraction items (based on Hoffner & Cantor's, 1991, definition of interpersonal attraction) which asked how much participants liked, wanted to be like and felt similar to each character for the purposes of capturing the modeling potential that certain characters may have embodied. However, whereas Harrison relied on one composite score of interpersonal attraction, we distinguish among appearance identification/idealization, behavioral identification/idealization, and parasocial feelings/behaviors with favorite characters to provide a more nuanced assessment of how attachment style maps on to more specific interpersonal affinities for a favorite female character.

Three identification items assessed how similar participants perceived themselves to be with respect to their favorite character's behavior ("How similar is your behavior to that of your favorite character?"), social interactions ("How similar are your social interactions to that of your favorite

character") and physical appearance ("How similar is your physical appearance to that of your favorite character?"). Responses were made on 7-point Likert scales (0–6) ranging from "Not at all similar" to "Extremely similar." Because of their conceptual overlap, identification with character's behavior and social interaction were averaged together ($r = .41$, $p < .01$; $\alpha = .58$), while the physical appearance item was left on its own.

Three items assessed how much participants wanted to be like their favorite characters in terms of behavior ("How much would you want to behave like your favorite character?"), social interactions ("How much would you want to have social interactions like that of your favorite character"), and physical appearance ("How much would you want to look like your favorite character"). As with the identification items, idealization of characters' behavior and social interaction were averaged together for form one variable ($r = .58$, $p <. 001$; $\alpha = .73$), while the appearance idealization item was left on its own. Responses were made on a 7-point scale (0–6) ranging from "Not at all" to "Very much."

Parasocial connection to a favorite character was assessed by asking participants about feelings of imagined closeness as well as behavioral indicators of parasocial involvement. These items were adapted from Cole and Leets's (1999) version of Rubin et al.'s (1986) Parasocial Interaction Scale. The three items relevant to parasocial closeness ($\alpha = .69$) included, "How much can you imagine being close friends with your favorite character?", "How much would you miss your favorite character if s/he left the show?" and "How much do you look forward to watching your favorite character's show?" Four items relevant to parasocial behavior ($\alpha = .77$) included "If the person who plays your favorite character is being interviewed on a program you do not typically watch, how likely would you be to tune in?"; "If the person who plays your favorite character is featured in a magazine that you do not typically buy, how likely would you be to buy it?", "If you knew you had to miss your favorite character's show, how likely would you be to tape it and watch it later?", and finally, "Before or after watching your favorite character's show, how likely are you discuss him/her with your friends?" Responses were made on a 7-point Likert scale (0–6), anchored at "Not at all" and "Very much" for the affective items, and "Not at all likely" and "Extremely Likely" for the behavioral items.

Character body type. To determine whether the character affinity constructs described earlier varied as a function of character body type, female characters were classified as ultra-thin, average, or overweight in accordance with Harrison's (1997) coding scheme (e.g., characters were considered thin if their bodies were both noticeably slim and conspicuously on display). The characters were coded by the first author and two graduate students. For 13 of the characters selected, there was 100% agreement among coders. For the remaining 7 characters, 2 of 3 coders initially agreed and unanimity with the third coder was reached through subsequent discussion. Examples of thin characters are "Rachel" (Jennifer Aniston) and "Monica" (Courtney Cox Arquette) from *Friends*, as well as "Ally McBeal" (Calista Flockhart)

from the eponymously named show, while examples of average weight characters include "Phoebe" (Lisa Kudrow) from *Friends* and "Karen" (Megan Mullally) from *Will & Grace*. It bears mentioning that, on television, being average weight is a relative distinction, and represents individuals who might well be considered slim by real-world standards. Examples of media personas coded as overweight were Rosie O'Donnell and Oprah Winfrey; incidentally, these two were also the only nonfictional personas listed. Because only two participants listed overweight media personas, they were excluded from analyses of body type. Cartoon characters (e.g. Lisa Simpson, Daria) were also excluded from body type analyses because it was too difficult to classify them.

Results

Favorite character choices and descriptive information

The modal female characters selected were "Rachel" ($n = 12$) and "Phoebe" ($n = 10$) from *Friends*. Other characters that were chosen by at least two participants were: "Ally McBeal" ($n = 4$, from *Ally McBeal*), Amanda Peet ($n = 4$, from *Jack and Jill*), Shannon Doherty ($n = 3$, from *Charmed*), Katie Holmes ($n = 3$, from *Dawson's Creek*), "Elaine" ($n = 3$; from *Seinfeld*), "Lorili" ($n = 2$, from *Gilmore Girls*), "Grace" ($n = 3$, from *Will & Grace*), "Karen" ($n = 2$, *Will & Grace*), "Monica" (n = 2, *Friends*), "Buffy" ($n = 2$, from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), and "Scully" ($n = 2$, from *The X-Files*). In addition, four participants chose cartoon characters (e.g. "Daria," "Lisa Simpson").

Overall, participants reported greater attachment anxiety than attachment avoidance, $t(63) = -3.93$, $p < .001$; $M = 2.6$ vs. $M = 1.8$. As shown in Table 1, attachment anxiety and avoidance were uncorrelated. Table 1 also shows the variable means and inter-correlations among the character affinity variables. Participants rated themselves relatively low on appearance identification, but scored above the midpoint on feelings of parasocial closeness to favorite characters. Imagined closeness to a favorite character was negatively skewed (modal score of 5.3 on a 0–6 Likert scale; skewness $= -1.37$; $SE = .30$), so a square-root transformation was performed to normalize the distribution. However, because analyses of both transformed and untransformed scores yielded the same results, only the untransformed scores will be presented in the analysis.

Attachment style and character affinity

We anticipated that cartoon characters would be less relevant to various domains of identification and idealization; however, when regression analyses were conducted with and without these four participants, the results were virtually identical. Thus we have included these four participants in regressions reported below. One participant neglected to complete the attachment questions in the prescreening questionnaire and so the total sample came to 64 participants.

TABLE 1
**Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for identification,
idealization, and parasocial items and the attachment anxiety and avoidance
predictor variables**

| Variable	Mean (SD)	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Behavior identification	3.39 (1.18)	.49**	.54**	.30*	.28*	.27*	.04	−.17	−.20
2. Appearance identification	2.06 (1.51)		.38**	.31*	.22	.17	−.01	−.12	−.18
3. Behavior idealization	3.48 (1.39)			.62**	.65**	.45*	.05	−.06	−.38**
4. Appearance idealization	3.54 (2.08)				.50**	.37**	.12	−.16	−.36**
5. Parasocial closeness	4.50 (1.20)					.54**	.10	−.07	−.27*
6. Parasocial behavior	3.33 (1.38)						.16	.01	−.13
7. Attachment anxiety	2.57 (1.09)							−.01	−.01
8. Attachment avoidance	1.77 (1.20)								−.36**
9. Anxiety × avoidance (centered)	−.01 (1.40)								

$**p < .01$; $*p < .05$.

It was predicted that women who were higher in attachment anxiety and lower in avoidance (i.e., more anxious-ambivalent/preoccupied) would identify more with their favorite female character, idealize her more, and feel closer to her. In short, it was anticipated that preoccupied women would score higher on all character affinity variables. To test these hypotheses, we performed multiple regressions in which attachment anxiety and avoidance scores, which were centered (see Aiken & West, 1991), were entered at the first step, and the interaction between anxiety and avoidance was entered in the second step. The dependent variables predicted by the attachment variables were the two identification items (behavior and appearance), the two idealization items (behavior and appearance), and the two parasocial interaction composite items (emotional closeness and behavior). Thus, six regressions were performed.

As predicted, women higher in anxiety and lower in avoidance (fitting a preoccupied attachment style) showed more behavioral identification with, behavioral and appearance idealization of, and feelings of imagined friendship (parasocial closeness) with their favorite character. However, inspection of the overall predictive utility of the full models reveal that attachment style only explained a marginal portion of the variance in behavioral identification and parasocial closeness (in partial support of Hypotheses 1 and 4i). The idealization variables, however, were significantly explained by attachment style (in full support of Hypotheses 2 and 3). Findings are reported in detail below.

Attachment avoidance marginally predicted decreased behavioral idealization of a favorite character, $\beta = -.27$, $t(63) = -1.86$, $p < .07$. However, a significant interaction emerged between anxiety and avoidance, $\beta = -.46$, $t(63) = -3.76$, $p < .001$; F change $= 14.12$, $p < .001$. Figure 1 shows that, as predicted, women with high anxiety but low avoidance reported the greatest desire to behave like their favorite female character. The full model was significant, $F(1, 63) = 4.88$, p $< .01$. Appearance idealization was

FIGURE 1
Desire to behave and interact like character as a function of attachment anxiety and avoidance. Graphs were plotted by calculating predicted scores for 1 standard deviation above and below the centered means for both anxious and avoidant attachment
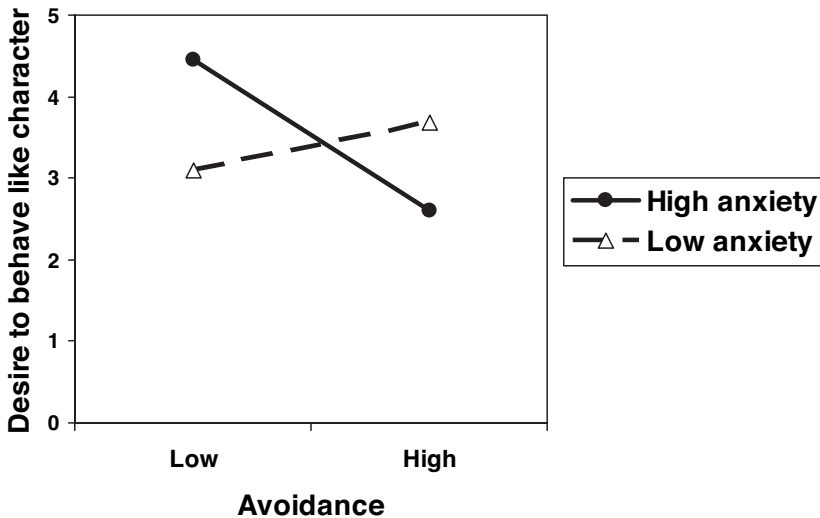

also negatively predicted by avoidant attachment, $\beta = -.58$, $t(63) = -2.79$, $p < .01$, but this effect was once again qualified by an interaction between avoidance and anxiety, $\beta = -.72$, $t(63) = -4.01$, $p < .001$; F change $= 16.04$, $p < .001$. As shown in Figure 2, women scoring high on anxiety and low on avoidance showed the greatest desire to look like their favorite character. The full model was also highly significant, $F(1, 63) = 6.36$, $p = .001$.

While avoidant attachment was associated with decreased perceived behavioral identification with a favorite character, $\beta = -.28$, $t(63) = -2.14$, $p < .05$, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction between anxiety and avoidance, $\beta = -.25$, $t(63) = -2.27$, $p < .05$; F change $= 5.14$, $p < .05$. The full model fell shy of significance; overall $F(1, 63) = 2.43$, $p < .08$. Parasocial closeness to a favorite character was also significantly predicted by the interaction between anxiety and avoidance, $\beta = -.30$, $t(63) = -2.63$, $p = .01$; F change $= 6.89$, $p = .01$. The full model in this case was also marginal significance; $F(1, 63) = 2.65$, $p < .06$. For both of these interactions, inspections of simple slopes reveal the same patterns obtained for idealization: Women scoring high on anxiety but low on avoidance showed the greatest behavioral identification and feelings of closeness to their favorite TV characters.

No significant associations with appearance identification were obtained, although a marginally significant interaction between attachment anxiety and avoidance did emerge; $\beta = -.27$, $t(63) = -1.88$, $p < .07$ (F change $= 3.52$, $p < .07$). No significant associations with attachment style were found for parasocial behavior; so H4ii was not supported.

FIGURE 2
**Desire to look like character as a function of attachment anxiety and
avoidance**
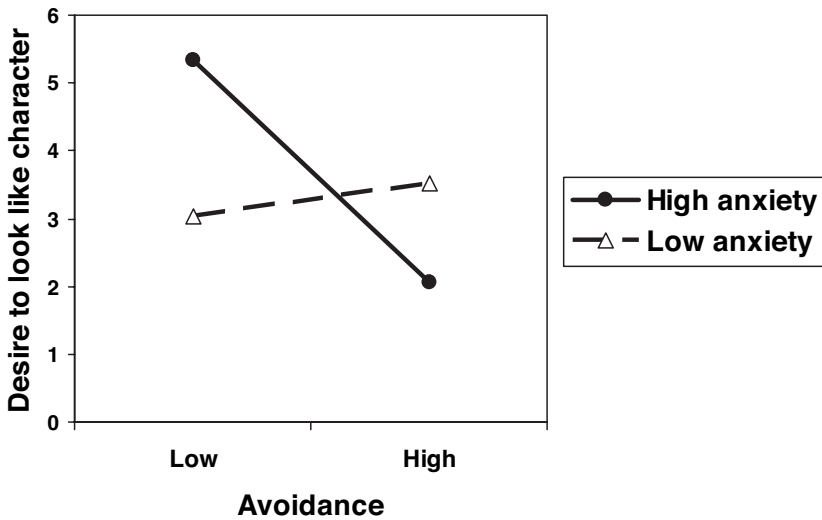
Affinity and attachment as a function of character's body type

For reasons noted earlier, the participants choosing either cartoon characters ($n = 4$) or overweight characters ($n = 2$) were omitted from analyses examining character body type.

To determine whether our coding distinction for female character body types was associated with any reported difference in appearance idealization, identification and attachment style, we performed a series of *t*-tests. We expected that selecting a thin favorite female (vs. an average weight characters) would be associated with increased idealization of that character's appearance (H5), but that women choosing thin characters would also report lower appearance identification than women choosing average weight characters (H6). Finally, we expected that anxiously attached women might be more likely to select thin media icons as favorites, given the increased social value (and perhaps perceived self worth) attached to a thin appearance (H7).

Compared to participants choosing average weight characters, women choosing thin characters did indeed report a greater desire to look like those characters, $M = 4.4$ vs. $M = 2.8$; $t(57) = 3.53$, $p = .001$. Participants who selected average characters, however, indicated significantly greater identification with that character's appearance than women choosing thin characters, $M = 2.7$ vs. $M = 1.8$; $t(57) = -2.36$, $p < .05$. Character body type did not distinguish degree of anxious or avoidant attachment. Thus, H5 and H6 were supported but H7 was not.

Discussion

Extending prior research (Cohen, 1997; Cole & Leets, 1999), and in line with predictions, results show that preoccupied women (i.e., those who experienced high anxiety about relationships and low avoidance of intimacy) reported the strongest behavioral and appearance idealization of a favorite female character. Preoccupied attachment also predicted increased behavioral identification and imagined closeness towards favorite female television stars, although these associations were less robust. This suggests that the domains of wanting to be like and look like a same-sex character are the most salient interpersonal parasocial motivations for anxious ambivalent women. This study also highlights the value of utilizing an interpersonal construct to understand multiple forms of character affinity; an individual's attachment style predicts a more comprehensive constellation of interpersonal engagement with a favorite character than the prior work on parasocial interaction and attachment style suggests. Thus, just as real-life others play an important role in the emotional life of preoccupied young women, so apparently do fictional characters.

Findings are consistent with how individuals with a preoccupied attachment style perceive themselves in relation to actual others; specifically, a preoccupied attachment style is characterized by a high dependence on and idealization of close others, in the context of unstable or negative views of self (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). It stands to reason that individuals would anchor on an idealized other more strongly in attempt to obtain a more secure sense of self. However, individuals with a preoccupied attachment style are also known for having ambivalent views of others, perhaps due in part to their chronic worry that others may be unreliable in their attention or affection. With this in mind, results also suggest that beyond affording an analogy for real life relationships, favorite characters may offer anxiously attached women an opportunity for a more secure attachment than they may experience in real life – media persona are highly reliable and accessible others who may elicit heightened idealization from viewers exactly because, "emotional attachment [to media personas] is not complicated by the ambivalence that characterizes actual relationships; admiration is unchecked by the recognition of faults and limitations" (Caughey, 1984, p. 61).

Counter to study hypotheses, selection of a thin character was not linked to greater attachment anxiety or avoidance which suggests that attachment style is more predictive of a young woman's interpersonal attitudes toward her favorite character than to the body type of the character that she chooses. Selecting a thin character was, however, associated with an increased desire to look like that character which is consistent with prior work (Harrison, 1997). Regardless of attachment style, this type of idealization may be problematic. The ubiquitous ultra-thin and glamorous characters on television, in movies, and on billboards represent a feminine ideal that often cannot even be met by the celebrities themselves without the aid of a personal chef, trainer, and plastic surgeon (Kilbourne, 1999), as well as expert make-up

artists and airbrush techniques that are increasingly standard procedure for celebrity photo shoots. It is particularly telling that while appearance idealization was higher for those choosing thin characters, appearance identification was higher for women choosing average weight characters. This suggests that individuals may be well aware of the ways in which their actual appearance differs from a media ideal and this reality check may be troubling; according to Markus and Cross (1991), when the gap between actual and ideal selves becomes unattainably wide individuals may feel demoralized rather than inspired.

It is important to highlight that this line of research does not intend to pathologize emotional relationships with media characters. If anything, results are in favor of viewing parasocial interaction as an extension of normal social interaction (as Giles, 2002, among others, recommended); that is, women who crave and seek intimacy in everyday life also bring these motivations to their media consumptions habits. Indeed, media programs and characters may function as a sort of social psychological candy store, providing arrays of visually and emotionally appealing relational representations for people who tend to spend a lot of time and energy thinking about and managing their close relationships. (See Gardner, Pickett, & Knowles, 2005, for discussions of social "snacking" and of using parasocial interactions as defensive social "shielding" to regulate belongingness needs).

But what are the costs and benefits of such interpersonal engagement in the long term? Although our data do indeed fit the proposed model linking greater attachment anxiety with specific kinds of character involvement, we are unable to make clear causal claims from correlational data. Future research should examine the potential distinction between immediate and long term effects of such media use. While media role models may provide temporary self-enhancement for anxious young women – and there is provocative research to suggest that they may (Mills, Polivy, Herman, & Tiggeman, 2002; Myers & Biocca, 1992) – such engagement may erode self-image over the long term. An addictive cycle may be set in motion over time, wherein media use soothes anxiety during and perhaps immediately after viewing but exacerbates negative self-views once one's actual anxious self becomes salient once more. However, it is also possible that using media to regulate hyper-activated attachment needs may be a relatively benign strategy for anxious ambivalent young women. Perhaps reliable access to an idealized media icon offers anxious individuals the opportunity to internalize a more stable, positive view of self, particularly if the character models prosocial or emotionally healthy qualities. Continued exploration of such issues will be essential in understanding how media use may reflect as well as impact young women's emotional well being.

Limitations of the study bear mentioning. First, the sample size was relatively small. Despite significant findings obtained in step with hypotheses, a larger sample would have provided more power. Second, our reliability for the identification items was a bit lower than ideal (at .58). However, we did obtain the anticipated, albeit marginal, pattern of association between preoccupied attachment and identification. Third, although the purpose of

this study was to examine same-sex favorite characters, and we did not find any meaningful differences in attachment style between those who chose male vs. female favorite characters, we might have gained more valuable insights by asking participants to list one male and one female favorite character. Future research might investigate the potentially distinct roles that male and female characters play for anxiously attached women. The exclusively female sample also prevents us from generalizing to how men interact with favorite characters and whether the same pattern of pre-occupied attachment and idealization would emerge for a male sample. Although research has generally not found striking gender differences in the distribution of attachment styles (Roberts, Gotlib, & Kassel, 1996; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996), women are more likely than men to stake their self-worth in their physical appearance and in other's approval (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouchette, 2003). Taking into account the research suggesting that girls are more likely to idealize same-sex characters who embody a perceived attractive appearance than boys (Hoffner, 1996), we might predict that preoccupied men may idealize media icons to a lesser extent or for different reasons than preoccupied women do. Moreover, the male and female characters that make up the media environment are hardly equivalent; content analyses (Glascock, 2000) reveal that female characters remain under-represented in positions of power and over-sexualized in their physical appearance. Finally, our coding of female body type relied exclusively on a mainstream, weight-specific construct (thin vs. average or heavy). If we had coded the characters on another aesthetic dimension (e.g. stylish) or even on a personality dimensions (e.g. confident with her body) we might have found different patterns of idealization, identification and attachment.

Future research might also take up the question of the match between individuals' relational style and a favorite characters relational style. Is Jennifer Aniston's character on *Friends* and/or her public persona so popular among young women because she exhibits some of the same relational anxieties as her biggest fans, while retaining the allure of unattainable status and glamour? Ultimately, we believe this blossoming line of work has great potential for scholars in both communication and psychology; media personas may provide the perfect projective assessment for clarifying individuals' underlying emotional and social needs.

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