



# Idealized TV friends and young women's body concerns

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## ABSTRACT

The present study examined which specific forms of interpersonal involvement with both female and male TV characters are linked to young women's body concerns. One hundred and fifty undergraduate females completed an on-line questionnaire which assessed wishful identification (desire to be and look like), parasocial interaction (imagined friendship), and perceived similarity (of personality, life, and appearance) to favorite female and male TV characters, as well as Body Shame and Body Surveillance. Results for female characters showed that Body Surveillance was positively associated with wishful identification but negatively associated with perceived similarity to that character. Wishful identification with a favorite female character alone predicted Body Shame. For male characters, Romantic Attachment was associated with increased Body Surveillance. No male character affinities were significantly associated with Body Shame. Importantly, these associations were significant after BMI and global self-esteem were taken into account.

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## Introduction

Female media images and characters function as salient and ubiquitous cues for appearance norms and prescriptions, and provide a compelling social context in which girls and women may evaluate their own bodies. Numerous studies – experimental (see Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002), correlational (Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Shroff & Thompson, 2006) and longitudinal (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Stice, Spangler, & Agras, 2001) – have found that increased exposure to idealized images of attractiveness in entertainment media corresponds to increased body image concerns and eating disorder symptoms among girls and women. Much of this research has also identified risk factors that predict, moderate or mediate the link between media exposure and body concerns, such as the “internalization of a thin media ideal” or “sociocultural attitudes towards appearance”, which speak to an awareness and adoption of media standards for one's own appearance (Heinberg, Thompson, & Stormer, 1995; Thompson & Stice, 2001; Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posovac, & Posovac, 2005).

Far fewer studies have explored how more global interpersonal affinities for favorite television characters may be linked to young women's body image concerns (Harrison, 1997; Maltby, Giles, Barber, & McCutcheon, 2005). And, none of these has explicitly distinguished the roles that wishful identification (desire to be like) with a favorite female character, perceived similarity, and imagined friendship (or “parasocial interaction”; Horton & Wohl,

1956) might play in young women's body image concerns. Finally, although some researchers have illuminated the powerful emotional connections that young women may cultivate with favorite male media personae (Caughy, 1994; Engle & Kasser, 2005), we do not yet know how male character affinities may be related to women's body image concerns, if at all. The present study aims to address these important gaps in the literature.

The desire to look like female media icons has emerged as a reliable predictor of body image concerns (Thomsen, McCoy, Gustafson, & Williams, 2002) and, not coincidentally, has been considered part and parcel of adopting a sociocultural attitude towards appearance (SATAQ-3; Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2006). But how might more global interpersonal affinities for particular television characters figure into the equation? Harrison (1997) proposed that women who experienced increased Interpersonal Attraction (a composite of liking, wanting to be like, and feeling similar) to thin, but not average or heavy female media characters, would report increased eating disorder symptoms. Results supported her hypotheses, even after controlling for mere exposure to thin media content, and demonstrated that how young women “perceive and respond to specific mass media characters” (p. 494) is an important indicator of their body related cognitions and behaviors. Along similar lines, Maltby et al. (2005) examined the association between various forms of celebrity worship and attention to body shape in three samples that varied by age and gender. Results indicated that, for younger women only, increased “intense-personal” feelings for an admired same sex celebrity (e.g., “I consider my favourite celebrity to be my soul mate”) predicted increased body shape concerns. Maltby et al. (2005) conclude by suggesting, “para-social relationships with

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celebrities perceived as having a good body shape may lead to poorer body image in female adolescents" (p. 29).

These studies take an important step forward by illuminating character specific affinities that may link media exposure to body concerns among young women. However, the measures used confound or obscure various forms of affinity and leave open questions about which particular interpersonal dimensions are most relevant to body image concerns among female viewers. Although feelings of similarity and wishful identification are clearly related constructs, they may not have identical relationships to body image. For example, while perceived similarity predicts increased imitative tendencies in certain domains (e.g., media violence and viewer aggression, [Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003](#)), presumably due to the increased self-relevance of a given media model, perceived similarity to an idealized favorite female character may reflect a positive sense of self and body image and may therefore be *inversely* linked to body image concerns. However, wishful identification, or a desire to be like, and more specifically, to look like a favorite character may be positively related to body concerns. The extent to which a viewer wishes she was more like an idealized character may be symptomatic of a gap between her actual and ideal self; indeed, research has shown that larger, not smaller, perceived discrepancies between an actual and an ideal self predicts increased body dissatisfaction ([Strauman, Vookles, Berenstein, Chaiken, & Higgins, 1991](#)). If a "hoped for" self is within realistic reach, it may provide individuals with an encouraging and healthy goal; however, if the gap between one's actual and possible self is too large to cross, it may have a demoralizing effect ([Markus & Cross, 1991](#)). The tendency to idealize a female media character, whose body type may be unattainable for most viewers, may thus both reflect and contribute to greater body image concerns.

Experiencing "intense-personal" feelings for an admired media character goes beyond mere liking (as measured by [Harrison, 1997](#)), although both forms of affinity may be conceptualized as relevant to parasocial interaction ([Giles, 2002](#); [Horton & Wohl, 1956](#); [Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985](#)). Originally coined by [Horton and Wohl \(1956\)](#), parasocial interaction has been used to describe the "illusion of intimacy" (p. 217) that is created between a given media persona and audience members as they get to "know" that persona by repeated exposure to idiosyncrasies in his or her speech and behavior. This phenomenon has since been the subject of empirical scrutiny as researchers applied it to a variety of social psychological domains (e.g., attachment theory; [Cole & Leets, 1999](#); [Greenwood, Pietromonaco, & Long, 2008](#)). Although scholars have noted that parasocial relationships may offer viewers many of the benefits of social interaction without the anxiety or rejection fears that accompany real life relationships ([Caughey, 1984](#); [Cole & Leets, 1999](#); [Derrick, Gabriel, & Tippin, 2008](#)), fictionalized friendships with idealized characters may have a downside. To the extent that media characters are treated as emotionally compelling friends they may also be considered appropriate targets for social comparison ([Festinger, 1954](#)), which may elicit demoralizing self-evaluations as research by [Maltby et al. \(2005\)](#) and [Harrison \(1997\)](#) suggests. However, as noted earlier, research to date has not carefully parsed different forms of interpersonal affinity for media characters. It is important to clarify which forms of interpersonal involvement with female media icons may be most relevant to body image concerns to distinguish benign from more problematic media affinities. The present study aims to distinguish the independent contributions that perceived similarity, wishful identification and parasocial interaction may make to young women's body image concerns.

It is not just female characters who inspire affinity among female viewers, but we know very little about how interpersonal connection to male characters is implicated in women's body

concerns. Objectification theory suggests that media images and messages that privilege an objectifying male gaze may socialize young girls and women to adopt an observer's perspective on the self, with serious psychological consequences ([Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997](#)). Indeed, research has found that simply anticipating an interaction with a male (vs. female) partner has been shown to elevate young women's body anxiety, presumably because it activates anticipation of being physically objectified ([Calogero, 2004](#)). Similarly, fantasizing about a romantic interaction with a male media persona may trigger body consciousness as young women imagine being seen and potentially judged on the basis of their physical appearance by an idealized male celebrity. Moreover, male media icons are often romantically linked to slim and glamorous females (both on and off screen) who may function as hypothetical competitors and hence inspire anxiety-provoking standards and comparison processes. Interestingly, evidence suggests that exposure to idealized females in the media may "activate desired attributes of and expectations for men (e.g., muscularity)" ([Lavine, Sweeney, & Wagner, 1999](#), p. 1056). The reverse scenario is also likely; that is, affinity to idealized males in the mass media may activate culturally glorified physical attributes among women (e.g., thinness). The present study will be the first to examine this possibility.

Finally, [Engle and Kasser \(2005\)](#) found that adolescent girls' idolization of male celebrities (e.g., "I think he is the most talented and best looking guy in the whole world") was associated with increased materialism. They suggest that young girls who harbor romantic fantasies about male celebrities also "have bought into the commercial and materialistic messages dominant in US culture" (p. 277). The study did not assess body image concerns, but given that a myriad of messages about ideal bodies that pervade commercial media, in concert with romantic fantasies about idolized male celebrities, it would not be difficult to imagine that body concerns may also be implicated in such interpersonal affinities.

#### *The present study*

The present study builds on and extends prior research by assessing and distinguishing among similarity, wishful identification and parasocial interaction with both female and male media characters in conjunction with young women's body image concerns. Body concerns for the purposes of this study were operationalized by utilizing two of [McKinley and Hyde's \(1996\)](#) Objectified Body Consciousness subscales: Body Surveillance (the tendency to chronically monitor one's appearance) and Body Shame (the tendency to feel a global sense of failure when one's body does not conform to an idealized standard). This measure has been utilized often to assess normative body image concerns among college students (e.g., [Forbes, Jobe, & Rivak, 2006](#)).

Based on research outlined above, it is predicted that increased wishful identification (desire to be like and look like a favorite character) and parasocial interaction (imagining the character as a friend, missing the character if her show were to be cancelled) to a favorite female character will each be associated with greater Body Surveillance and/or Body Shame. Because perceiving the self as similar to a favorite female character may indicate a more secure sense of self and body image, increased perceptions of similarity to a favorite female character may be associated with lower levels of Body Surveillance and/or Body Shame. However, to the extent that similarity may be part and parcel of an overall interpersonal attraction to a particular character ([Harrison, 1997](#)) and to the extent that similarity has been associated with increased imitative tendencies (e.g., [Huesmann et al., 2003](#)), it is possible that increased perceived similarity with a favorite female character will be associated with increased Body Surveillance and/or Body Shame tendencies. This question is left open.

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