# Theorizing Parasocial Interactions Based on Authenticity: The Development of a Media Figure Classification Scheme

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The relationships viewers develop with media figures have received substantial attention in the scholarship of entertainment. The present research proposes an original four-dimension classification scheme of media figures theoretically based on authenticity across dimensions of depiction (live action vs. animated), story (fiction vs. nonfiction), form (human vs. nonhuman), and traits (super vs. normal). This classification addresses limitations from previous parasocial interaction (PSI) models and creates an exhaustive taxonomy of the types of media figures with whom viewers can develop PSIs. Implications for how the classification scheme informs identity formation, social comparisons with media figures, perceptions of social reality, maintenance of PSIs, and media enjoyment will be discussed.

*Keywords:* parasocial interaction, authenticity, media figure, perceived realism, identification

Understanding the nature of audience engagement with entertainment content continues to attract the attention of media scholars, primarily as such involvement generates implications for viewer enjoyment, learning, identification, and need gratifications. Horton and Wohl (1956) coined the term "parasocial interaction" (PSI) to define the seemingly mediated interpersonal relationship that occurs between a television (TV) viewer and a media figure. Although the form of such interaction can vary widely, it is characteristically considered "one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). It is this lack of reciprocity that identifies an interaction as parasocial, consisting of actions of an audience member directed toward a media persona who cannot respond to or reciprocate those actions.

Since the introduction of the concept, scholars in the fields of communication, psychology, and sociology have attempted to not only expand on the depth and breadth of PSI's conceptualization but also understand its antecedents, process, and effects (e.g., Giles, 2002; Hoffner, 1996; Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Sood & Rogers, 2000; Tsay & Bodine, 2012). Horton and Wohl (1956) applied the relevance of PSIs to the areas of media effects and social cognition, particularly suggesting that audience members turn to media personae for guidance on how to behave. Further, Giles (2002) proposed that many similarities between PSIs and real-life social interactions often make it difficult to distinguish the cognitive processes involved during such mediated and actual interpersonal relationships. Specifically, Cohen (2003) found parallel responses to the ways viewers emotionally and mentally evaluate parasocial and real-life breakups. To date, PSIs have been linked to the selection of media content, levels of media consumption, and the extent of media effects (Klimmt et al., 2006). For example, Sood and Rogers (2000) identified affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of PSIs in the context of an Indian soap opera, indicating that PSIs can evoke

interpersonal reactions, internal contemplation, external dialogue, and behavior change.

Moreover, PSIs can impact the identity formation of audience members and their social construction of reality. Inspired by the work of Mead (1934), Blumer (1969) coined the term "symbolic interactionism" to explain the ways people perceive and construct their social worlds. Blumer (1969) succinctly proposed three tenants of symbolic interactionism: (1) people act toward objects/events based on the meanings they ascribe to them, (2) the meanings of those objects/events are derived from social interactions with others, and (3) these meanings emerge from an interpretive process that occurs between a person and the objects/events he or she encounters. Being that PSIs resemble social interactions (though they occur in a mediated context), meanings ascribed to media figures and the relationships viewers develop with them are indeed constructed. Such meanings from the interaction can in turn influence both perceptions of the viewers and those of the world in which they live. Although this impact on audience identity and social construction of reality can be subtle and indirect, PSIs can also have a direct and tangible effect on such perceptions. Tian and Hoffner (2007) found PSI to be highly associated with the extent to which audiences altered their appearance, personality, values, or lifestyle to mimic that of a fictional character from the drama *Lost*.

## Proposition of a Classification Scheme of Media Figures Based on Authenticity

Owing to the influences of PSI on a viewer's identity and perception of social reality, the present research proposes using authenticity or realism as a basis for classifying media figures, regardless of the program or genre to which they belong. Consistent support for authenticity as a significant predictor of PSI has been documented (see Alperstein, 1991; Piccirillo, 1986; Rosaen & Dibble, 2008; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Rubin et al., 1985). Rosaen and Dibble (2008) defined reality status as the "congruency between a TV character and what is observed in real life" and social realism as "how likely a show's characters and events are to occur in the real world" (p. 147). For the purpose of this research, a similar definition of figure authenticity is used, namely the degree to which a media character adheres to the laws of the physical world. While figure authenticity is one of many factors suggested to be an indicator of PSI, others include homophily (inclination to associate with similar others), affinity, liking, attractiveness, imitation, moral evaluations, and sympathy (see Cohen, 2001; Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Giles, 2002; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Konijn & Hoorn, 2005; Raney, 2004; Rosaen & Dibble, 2008). Whereas scholars have often examined figure authenticity as it complements the aforementioned PSI predictors, this factor is the most objective because it does not depend on the subjective and/or variable characteristics of the audience, such as viewers' personalities, attitudes, beliefs, values, judgments, and demographics. Although attractiveness can be rated somewhat objectively, each viewer may have subjective standards of beauty or physical appeal. However, whether a media figure adheres to the laws of the physical world can indeed be determined objectively.

With authenticity serving as an objective foundation for categorizing media figures across programs, genres, and outlets, a four-dimension classification scheme of media figures is introduced. Specifically, authenticity, assessed by the degree to which media figures abide by the laws of physics and could exist in the real world, will be discussed in reference to their *depiction* (live action vs. animated), *story* (fiction vs. nonfiction), *form* (human vs. nonhuman), and *traits* (super vs. normal). Therefore, the goals of the present research are twofold: (1) To develop an original classification scheme of media figures theoretically grounded on authenticity that suggests implications for audience engagement with entertainment media, and (2) To create an exhaustive classification system of the types of media figures with whom viewers can develop PSIs. With these objectives in mind, we will discuss discrepancies and limitations of prior PSI research models that have contributed to the construction of this four-dimension classification scheme of media figures. In subsequent sections, the dichotomies of each dimension (depiction, story, form, and traits), the integration of the four dimensions, and the value of this classification scheme in generating implications for identity formation, social comparisons with media figures, perceptions of social reality, maintenance of PSIs, and media enjoyment will be discussed.

## PSI Predictors Associated with Authenticity

As previously noted, there are several related and, sometimes, overlapping constructs that scholars have indicated as antecedents of PSIs, including homophily, similarity, affinity, liking, attractiveness, imitation, moral evaluations, and sympathy. Interestingly, these same constructs have also been found to predict identification. Some scholars have attempted to distinguish identification from PSI. Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) distinguished between character identification and wishful identification. Cohen (2001) conceptualized the former as an instance when "an audience member imagines him- or herself being that character and replaces his or her personal identity and role as audience member with the identity and role of the character within the text" (p. 251). During identification in the context of program viewing, the viewer is not aware of his or her role as an audience member and instead, completely assumes the identity of the media figure. Wishful identification, on the other hand, is defined as a more long-term process (Rosengren, Windahl, Hakansson, & Johnsson-Smaragdi, 1976), in which identification could extend outside the viewing experience. In this case, the viewer desires to become like a media figure and may even alter his or her appearance, behavior, or personality to do so (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Such a process parallels Erikson's (1974) explanation of identity versus role confusion in which in early adolescence, children perhaps develop or seek an identity by modeling after prominent media personae.

Cohen (2001) argued, "Unlike conceptions of identification that stress feelings and attributions about the character (e.g., sympathy and similarity), the current conceptualization of identification focuses on sharing the perspective of the character; feeling with the character, rather than about the character" (p. 251). Here, identification is suggested to be separate from constructs like similarity, liking, and moral judgment because the process involves the viewer to lose his or her external perspective and self-awareness that would impede overt evaluation of media figures. However, Konijn and Hoorn (2005) conceptualize similarity as the core construct of identification. They discussed identification and empathy in the context of "involvement," during which a viewer adopts the perspective of a media figure while maintaining a degree of distance. As such, they posited that similarity is a primary predictor of identification and one of several factors influencing liking of and sympathy for a media figure, both of which facilitate greater involvement (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005).

This conceptualization of involvement is similar to Rosengren and Windahl's (1972) four-dimension model that defines PSI and identification as two facets of media engagement. No media engagement (referred to as detachment) occurs if neither PSI nor identification is present. Moderate engagement occurs if either PSI or identification is present. Maximum engagement (referred to as capture) occurs when both PSI and identification are present. Therefore, whereas scholars may conceptualize PSI, identification, authenticity, liking, similarity, and other constructs differently, there is a general pattern that such concepts are interrelated. Interestingly, although authenticity is rarely treated as a primary construct influencing media engagement, scholars have sometimes implied that realism is a facet of similarity. For example, Feilitzen and Linne (1975) found that the key factors that influenced identification with media figures among young viewers were perceived similarity of age, sex, nationality, and social status. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954) used the term homophily to refer to a tendency for relationships to form between those with similar characteristics. McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly (1975) developed a fourfold measure of homophily using attitude, background, value (morality), and appearance as their dimensions. Guided by these categories, attitude similarity was found to be a strong predictor of PSI, and background and appearance similarities were moderately associated with PSI (Turner, 1993). Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) applied a comparable conceptualization of similarity by examining demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, race, and age) and personal characteristics (e.g., personality, behavioral tendencies, and life experiences), and found that similarities in gender and attitudes strongly predicted wishful identification.

Other scholars, however, have placed more emphasis on authenticity as associated with PSI. While Rubin et al. (1985) and Rubin and Perse (1987) applied the subjective construct of perceived realism to studying these interactions,

they nonetheless found that when viewers perceived media content to be more realistic, they exhibited higher levels of PSIs, particularly in the context of TV news and soap operas. Similar to the conceptualization of authenticity in the present research, Rosaen and Dibble (2008) objectively measured media figures based on social realism. Findings suggest that not only do older children have more socially realistic favorite media figures, but also these PSIs were stronger if media figures were deemed more socially realistic or authentic. Realism may also inform social responses as research has found that jealousy is experienced among those who evaluate others with the same favorite media persona (Tsay & Banjo, 2007).

Disposition theory states that enjoyment of media content is a function of the moral judgment and likability of characters (Raney, 2004; Zillmann & Bryant, 1994). Specifically, enjoyment is optimized when liked media figures succeed and when disliked media figures fail. As such, empathy is the fundamental determinant of disposition development (Zillmann, 1991). However, Raney (2004) suggested that dispositions toward media figures are often formed rather quickly and minimal information is needed to make character evaluations. In this case, liking or disliking a character may precede moral judgment. Relevant stereotypes may be used to initially aid in forming dispositions toward stereotypical media figures (Raney, 2003, 2004; Raney & Bryant, 2002). Thus, we expect that a media figure's degree of similarity to a viewer may be both a convenient and seemingly effective criterion for developing an initial disposition. As such, a logical indication of similarity is authenticity. Because authenticity can be evaluated objectively and with little knowledge of the media figure (via aspects of the character's depiction, story, form, and traits), authenticity is more likely to initially inform disposition development than less obvious measures of similarity, such as attitudes or values. Thus, it is suggested that authenticity is both an important aspect of forming evaluations of similarity and of determining PSI, media engagement, and enjoyment.

The emphasis on the role of authenticity in PSIs, however, does not deny the possibility of PSIs with inauthentic media figures. As Konijn and Hoorn (2005) noted, whereas authenticity enhances media engagement by eliciting stronger emotional responses or by delivering more salient information, inauthenticity can promote engagement by generating greater intrigue, excitement, and entertainment. Thus, the classification scheme of media figures based on authenticity that is proposed herein is designed to account for aspects of authentic and inauthentic media figures across four dimensions (depiction, story, form, and traits), and for the interactions among both authentic and inauthentic features. As a result, this classification scheme seeks to address a concern raised by Giles (2002), "What psychological explanations lie behind these types of attachments [parasocial attachments to inauthentic media figures]?" (p. 291).

## Limitations of Prior PSI Typologies

While media engagement typologies are generally formed based on the relationship between a viewer and media figure (e.g., Rosengren and Windahl's (1972) four-level model of detachment, PSI, identification, and capture), debates over the conceptualizations and roles of PSI, identification, wishful identification, involvement, disposition, and homophily also affect the viewer–media figure relationship. The viewer component of such relationships is also often explored implicitly or explicitly, as most PSI studies adopt either a uses and gratifications or a media effects perspective. However, the media figure component of such interactions has been given minimal attention. This may be due in part to studies that examine PSIs in particular genres, such as news, talk shows, soap operas, and cartoons. Whereas genre-specific PSIs may inform our understanding of the nature of these mediated relationships, a contemporary classification scheme of media figures that can be applied to all genres of programming is valuable to entertainment scholarship. In particular, as media content diversifies, so does the variety of media figures that are depicted in TV, film, and other outlets, prompting a closer examination of the broad spectrum of media personae available for interaction. Hence, a more comprehensive classification scheme of media figures based on authenticity is needed.

Giles (2002) suggested a three-level PSI typology based on the potential for a viewer to experience face-to-face contact with a media figure. First-order PSI is the most realistic,

wherein a media figure directly addresses the viewer and the viewer could have a face-to-face encounter with him/her (e.g., a newscaster or talk show host). Second-order PSI refers to an interaction with a media figure that is fictional, but has a physical counterpart (e.g., a soap opera character or action hero who is clearly a fictional character, where a viewer could still have a face-to-face encounter with the actress/actor portraying the character). Because contact with the actual media figure is impossible, yet contact could be made with the character's counterpart (actress/actor), second-order PSIs are moderately realistic. Finally, third-order PSI occurs when the interaction is with fantasy or cartoon figures that have no real-life counterparts. In this case, because face-to-face contact with the media figure is impossible, such interactions are the least realistic.

Although the potential for face-to-face contact is not entirely problematic as a framework for a PSI typology, the main limitation of Giles's (2002) typology lies in the lack of exhaustive categories and basis for realism. For example, relationship potential does not take into account nonfictional media figures that no longer exist in their physical form (e.g., Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Gene Kelly, and Peter Jennings). Furthermore, the realism attached to meeting a media figure seems to override the many attributes of the media figure that would define him/her as authentic. Such attributes of the media figure (e.g., depiction, story, form, and traits) are imperative in determining the degree to which he or she is authentic, or adheres to the laws of the physical world, not simply the extent to which face-to-face contact is plausible. Thus, the proposed classification scheme attempts to overcome such limitations and provides a more comprehensive means of classifying media figure authenticity. With these goals in mind, each dimension of the classification scheme is defined solely in terms of authenticity. The result is a taxonomy that is more consistent and exhaustive than the one proposed by Giles (2002) and is theoretically motivated by more refined classifications of authenticity. As previously mentioned, some scholars (e.g., Rubin et al., 1985; Rubin & Perse, 1987) have used the subjective construct of perceived realism in studying PSIs. This research, however, uses an objective measure of authenticity, similar to that of Rosaen and Dib-

ble (2008). Rosaen and Dibble (2008) determined the social realism of media figures using two dimensions (appearance and behavior), with coders evaluating each dimension as either real or not real for each media figure. The evaluations of each dimension were then combined to yield one of three media figure classifications (not real, partially real, or completely real). The proposed classification scheme of media figures uses a similar method; however, it will incorporate four dimensions by which media figures will be evaluated based on authenticity (depiction, story, form, and traits). These dimensions of authenticity consist of both manifest and latent features of media figures.

## Dimensions of Media Figure Authenticity Based on Manifest and Latent Features

In light of the limited scope of using the possibility of meeting a media figure as the theoretical foundation for a PSI typology (Giles, 2002), our classification scheme of media figures takes into account that authenticity can be a result of the qualities inherent in the depiction, story, form, and traits of characters. Such features are expected to facilitate the extent to which a media figure is deemed authentic from the perspective of the viewer. Thus, the framework for the current classification scheme is based on a combination of manifest (explicit) and latent (implicit) figure characteristics, which convey a sense of realism to the audience. In particular, the most peripheral feature of a media figure that visibly implies authenticity is whether he or she is animated or in live action form. Another aspect that taps into authenticity is the nature of the story in which the media figure is placed. Depending on whether the media figure's story is fiction (based on fantasy) or nonfiction (based on a true account) could impact the extent to which a viewer sees the media figure as authentic. While the fictional attribute of a media figure is often clear in TV genres, such as soap operas, dramas, or science fiction, knowledge about whether a media figure actually experienced the events may be ambiguous and may need to be developed over time. Therefore, the fictional versus nonfictional nature of a media figure could be considered as both a manifest and latent feature of his or her perceived authenticity. Lastly, the physical form and traits of a media figure could

have implications for a viewer's evaluation of the character's realistic disposition. Visibly, a media figure may be in the form of a human or nonhuman (animal or inanimate object), or may intrinsically possess capabilities exceeding normal human standards, distinguishing the media figure as having super qualities or normal qualities. Thus, the aforementioned manifest and latent features of media figures with which viewers are likely to develop PSIs could play a vital role in determining their authenticity. Taking into consideration these elements, a four-dimension classification scheme of media figures is introduced based on depiction, story, form, and traits.

## Four-Dimension Classification Scheme of Media Figures

The subsequent sections detail each of the four dimensions of the proposed classification scheme of media figures: (1) depiction (animated vs. live action), (2) story (fiction vs. nonfiction), (3) form (human vs. nonhuman—animal or inanimate object), and (4) traits (super vs. normal). Included in these descriptions are examples of media figures that represent the dichotomy within each dimension.

### Animated Versus Live Action

The televisual aspect of a program, through which figure authenticity is explicitly conveyed, serves as the first dimension. Media figures may be animated (e.g., Nemo in *Finding Nemo*, Homer in *The Simpsons*, and Simba in *The Lion King*) or in the form of live action (e.g., Meredith Grey in *Grey's Anatomy*, Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex in the City*, and Walter White in *Breaking Bad*). It is expected that media figures that are drawn on paper or digitally created (cartoons) would be perceived as less authentic than those captured by filming live actors. Most commonly, live action refers to programs that are acted out by human or noncartoon actors. Although animated and live action figures are mutually exclusive qualitatively, there are instances in which they can coexist in the same mediated environment. In hybrids of live action and animated films, for example, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and *Mary Poppins*, live action figures would be considered the real actors, such as Bob Hoskins and Julie Andrews,

whereas the animated figures would be Roger Rabbit and the dancing penguins, respectively. Nevertheless, it is logical to assume that perceptions of authenticity of a media figure are greater when he or she is in live action form as compared with animated form.

### Fiction Versus Nonfiction

The second dimension addresses the authenticity of the media figure based on his or her story. In particular, authenticity may be derived from whether the figure is fictional or nonfictional. In other words, the experiences and actions of a media figure as true accounts or fictitious occurrences could influence how a viewer evaluates the authentic nature of him/her. Media figures who are created on the basis of fantasy (e.g., Dexter Morgan in *Dexter*, Cosmo Kramer in *Seinfeld*, and Jack Bauer in *24*) and real-world media figures (e.g., Katie Couric, Oprah Winfrey, and Michael Jordan) are expected to elicit varying levels of perceived authenticity. Specifically, fictional media figures should be deemed less authentic than nonfictional ones because their roles and lives are created, rather than established through reality.

### Human Versus Nonhuman (Animal or Inanimate Object)

In addition to authenticity as a reflection of media figure depictions and stories, the physical form of a media figure also impacts authenticity. Media figures can be classified as humans (e.g., Cliff Huxtable in *The Cosby Show*, Will Truman in *Will & Grace*, and Hiro Nakamura in *Heroes*) or nonhumans in the form of animals (e.g., Donkey in *Shrek*, Lassie in *Lassie Comes Home*, and Piglet in *The Great Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*) or inanimate objects (e.g., Sponge Bob in *Sponge Bob Square Pants*, Chip in *Beauty and the Beast*, and Wilson in *Castaway*). Owing to potentially a stronger similarity to human figures as compared with nonhuman figures (because viewers are themselves human and this serves as the most salient reference point when they are exposed to media figures), the former could be deemed as more authentic or real when audience members undergo processes of social comparison.

## Super Traits Versus Normal Traits

The final dimension taps into the intrinsic qualities of media figures that may influence the degree to which the audience perceives them as authentic. More specifically, media figures could have abilities that are normal to human standards (normal traits), as compared with those that have unusual or special skills that make them superior to the average human (super traits). The latter type of media figure most commonly describes superheroes (e.g., Spiderman, Wolverine, and Superman), whereas figures with normal traits may include Jim Halpert in *The Office*, Chris Harrison in *The Bachelor*, and Jon Stewart in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Taking into account these variations in abilities, it is expected that authenticity is greater for media figures with normal traits, as compared with those with super traits. Although the aforementioned examples reference human figures, there are indeed cases in which nonhumans (animals and inanimate objects) can also differ in super and normal traits. Among animals, those with super traits include, Iago in *Aladdin* and Mike Wazowski in *Monsters Inc.*, and those with normal traits consist of Woodstock in *Charlie Brown* and Max in *The Little Mermaid*. For inanimate objects, the brooms in *Fantasia* possess super traits, and the book (*Love in the Time of Cholera*) in *Serendipity* has normal traits.

## Interactions Among the Four Authenticity Dimensions

While each of the four authenticity dimensions is theoretically and qualitatively distinct based on expected variations of figure authenticity, it is important to address the interactions among these dimensions. Figure 1 illustrates the 18 classifications of media figures that are produced from the four dimensions: depiction, story, form, and traits. These classifications are labeled in Figure 2 for animated media figures (AF1-AF6 and ANF1-ANF3) and Figure 3 for live action media figures (LF1-LF6 and LNF1-LNF3). For example, AF1 is an animated, fictional, human with super traits, and LNF2 is a live action, nonfictional, animal with normal traits. See Tables 1 and 2 for examples of media figures that fall in each of the 18 categories.

As formerly suggested, each dimension consists of its own categories that are expected to produce different degrees of authenticity (A) of the media figure. Specifically, for dimension 1 (animated vs. live action), $A_{LF1-6 \text{ and } LNF1-3} > A_{AF1-6 \text{ and } ANF1-3}$; for dimension 2 (fiction vs.
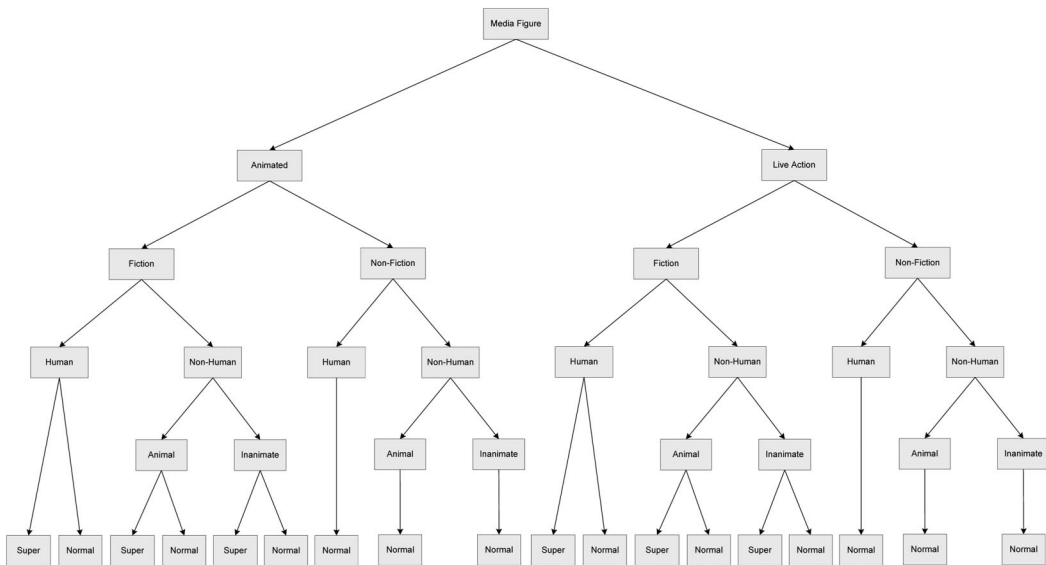


*Figure 1.* Classification scheme based on media figure characteristics. See Figures 2 and 3 and Tables 1 and 2 for classification details and examples.
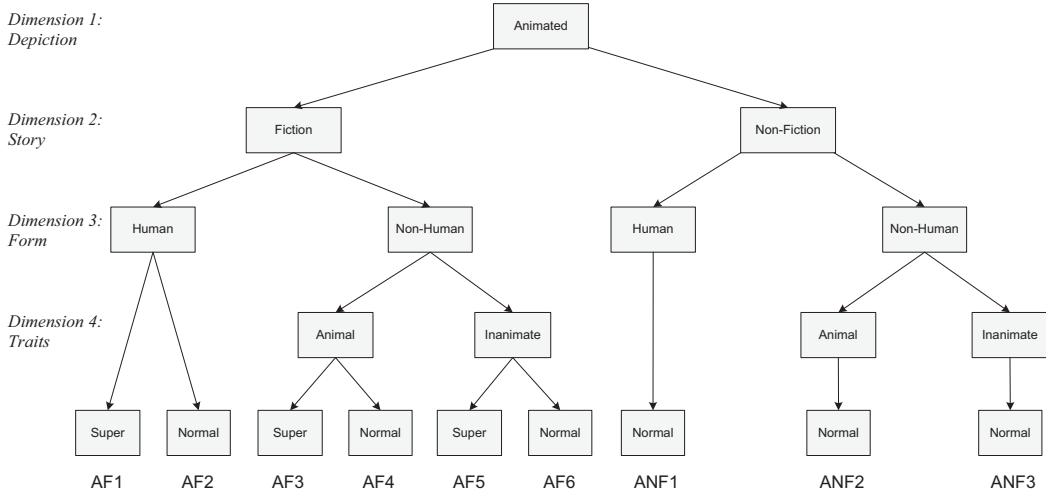
*Figure 2.* Classification scheme based on animated media figure characteristics. Animated fictional figures are labeled "AF," whereas animated nonfictional figures are labeled "ANF." The type of such figures based on human versus nonhuman (animal or inanimate) and super versus normal traits are denoted by the number that follows.

nonfiction), $A_{ANF1-3} > A_{AF1-6}$ and $A_{LNF1-3} > A_{LF1-6}$; for dimension 3 (human vs. nonhuman), $A_{AF1-2} > A_{AF3-6}$, $A_{ANF1} > A_{ANF2-3}$, $A_{LF1-2} > A_{LF3-6}$, and $A_{LNF1} > A_{LNF2-3}$; for dimension 4 (super traits vs. normal traits),

$A_{AF2} > A_{AF1}$, $A_{AF4} > A_{AF3}$, $A_{AF6} > A_{AF5}$, $A_{LF2} > A_{LF1}$, $A_{LF4} > A_{LF3}$, and $A_{LF6} > A_{LF5}$.

This taxonomy attempts to effectively introduce exhaustive classifications of the types of media figures with whom viewers can develop
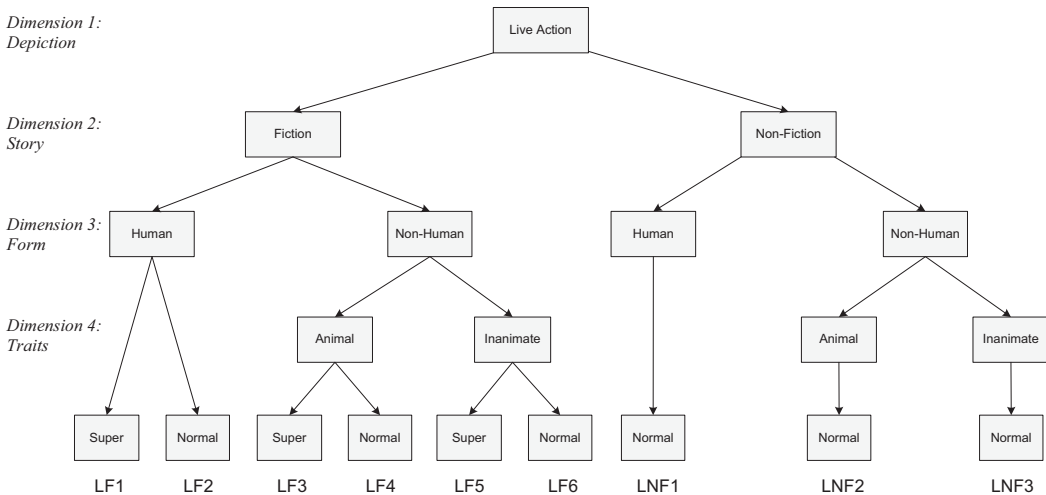


*Figure 3.* Classification scheme based on live action media figure characteristics. Live action fictional figures are labeled "LF," whereas live action nonfictional figures are labeled "LNF." The type of such figures based on human versus nonhuman (animal or inanimate) and super versus normal traits are denoted by the number that follows.

Table 1
*Examples of Animated Media Figures Across Nine Classifications (see Figure 2)*

| | Characteristics | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Fiction | | |
| AF1 | Human/super traits | Spiderman, Wolverine, Superman |
| AF2 | Human/normal traits | Fred Flinestone in *The Flinestones* |
| | | Charlie Brown in *Peanuts* |
| AF3 | Non-human (animal)/super traits | Mickey Mouse in *Steam Boat Willie* |
| | | Daffy Duck in *Looney Tunes* |
| AF4 | Non-human (animal)/normal traits | Max in *The Little Mermaid* |
| | | Woodstock in *Peanuts* |
| AF5 | Non-human (inanimate object)/super traits | Sponge Bob in *Sponge Bob Square Pants* |
| | | Brooms in *Fantasia* |
| AF6 | Non-human (inanimate object)/normal traits | Excalibur in *Sword in the Stone* |
| | | Book (*Love in the Time of Cholera*) in *Serendipity* |
| Non-fiction | | |
| ANF1 | Human/normal traits | Pocahontas in *Pocahontas* |
| | | Harriet Tubman in *The Animated Hero Classics: Harriet Tubman* |
| ANF2 | Non-human (animal)/normal traits | Animals in *Francis: The Knight of Assisi* |
| | | Turkey in *The Animated Hero Classics: William Bradford* |
| ANF3 | Non-human (inanimate object)/normal traits | Kite in *The Animated Hero Classics: Benjamin Franklin* |
| | | Hat in *The Animated Hero Classics: Abraham Lincoln* |

PSIs, and is theoretically grounded on figure authenticity. Although only main effects of figure authenticity are proposed for each dimension, the interactions among these dimensions would invaluably inform whether perceived authenticity differs for certain character features depending on the dimension of another character feature. For example, while live action media figures are suggested to be more authentic than animated ones *and* media figures with normal traits are considered more authentic than those with super traits, when these attributes interact, is a live action figure with super traits deemed more authentic than an animated figure with human traits? Also, is it possible that manifest character features are more effective at heightening perceived authenticity, as compared with latent character features? When these four dimensions of authenticity interact, such cross comparisons could provide an insightful understanding of which features may be stronger predictors of perceived authenticity of a media figure. Future research can also apply this new classification scheme and examine a variety of viewer response measures outside of PSI (e.g., enjoyment, identification, and in-

volvement) to determine relationships between media-figure type based on authenticity and the degree of experienced media engagement.

## Contributions of Media Figure Classification Scheme to Future Scholarship

While this four-dimension classification scheme based on authenticity is an initial attempt at creating a more refined and comprehensive understanding of the types of media figures with whom audiences have the potential to develop rich and intimate psychological interactions, entertainment scholars should consider using this taxonomy as a benchmark for examining an array of viewer–character relationships. Because media figures can be distinguished by a variety of features (depiction, story, form, and traits), it is important to not only look at main effects, but also consider the multidimensional nature of characters by taking into account the interactions among the four proposed dimensions. Therefore, future research could greatly benefit by using this classification scheme to theorize how the combination of these dimensions produce different magnitudes

Table 2
*Examples of Live Action Media Figures Across Nine Classifications (see Figure 3)*

| | Characteristics | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Fiction | | |
| LF1 | Human/super traits | Spock in *Star Trek* |
| | | Al in *Quantum Leap* |
| | | Magneto in *X-Men* |
| LF2 | Human/normal traits | Erika Cane in *All My Children* |
| | | Jack Shephard from *Lost* |
| LF3 | Non-human (animal)/super traits | Mister Ed in *Mister Ed* |
| | | Salem in *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* |
| LF4 | Non-human (animal)/normal traits | Lassie in *Lassie Come Home* |
| | | Douce in *The Bear* |
| LF5 | Non-human (inanimate object)/super traits | Chairry in *Pee Wee's Playhouse* |
| | | Mr. Window in *Pee Wee's Playhouse* |
| LF6 | Non-human (inanimate object)/normal traits | Wilson in *Castaway* |
| | | R2D2 in *Star Wars* |
| Non-fiction | | |
| LNF1 | Human/normal traits | Michael Jordan, Oprah Winfrey |
| | | Paris Hilton, Katie Courac |
| LNF2 | Non-human (animal)/normal traits | Paris Hilton's dog |
| | | Steve Irwin's crocodile |
| | | Buddy, Bill Clinton's dog |
| LNF3 | Non-human (inanimate object)/normal traits | Sweetness in *The Colbert Report* |
| | | Tennis ball in *Craig Ferguson Show* |

of authenticity and affective and cognitive viewer responses.

Furthermore, researchers should also examine whether viewers think about their specific mediated persona of reference as the character or the actor/actress. Although the objective of this research is to construct a classification scheme of media figures based on authenticity, the referent may impact perceived realism (e.g., whether the media figure actually experienced the events of a narrative). Nevertheless, this classification scheme has important implications for viewers' identity formation, social comparisons with media figures, perceptions of social reality, maintenance of PSIs, and media enjoyment.

If authenticity is positively related to perceptions of similarity with a media figure, this sense of realism may play a vital role in the way audiences shape their own identities. In particular, heightened perceived realism between the viewer and media figure could produce greater social learning effects (see Bandura, 1977). The likelihood of adopting values, beliefs, and attitudes of media figures may be higher for viewers who develop PSIs with those that are deemed more authentic. It may be the case that human-mediated relationships would facilitate

social learning, more so than animal- or inanimate object-mediated relationships. Thus, variations of social learning and knowledge acquisition of appropriate behaviors and social norms across the four attributional dimensions are indeed worthy of study.

Increased effects of PSIs on identity development raise issues of whether viewers are more likely to socially compare themselves with media figures. Applying theories of social comparison (see Festinger, 1954), when perceived similarity is high (implying greater authenticity), certain attributes of one's identity may be reinforced. However, when perceived similarity is low, such a condition could lead viewers to take part in either downward or upward social comparisons with the media figure. In the case where viewers are exposed to undesired attributes of a media figure, downward social comparisons may occur (leading to an increase in viewers' sense of self-worth). In contrast, when desired attributes of a media figure are recognized, wishful identification or upward social comparisons are likely to take place (driving viewers to seek self-improvement and to perceive the media figure as a role model).

In addition, PSIs distinguished by the authenticity of a media figure could impact viewers' social construction of reality. Through a symbolic interactionism perspective, meanings are constructed through PSIs based on the events that a media figure experiences. Therefore, the generation of meaning that is both ascribed to and learned from character events and the value and gratifications sought from these PSIs could have an effect on the way we perceive the world and construct our own social realities. More authentic representations of characters may produce richer interpretive experiences for audiences, potentially increasing the strength of PSIs.

Aside from the effects of PSIs on identity formation, social comparisons with media figures, and perceptions of social reality, it is important to recognize the changing media landscape in which PSIs can be manifested and cultivated. In particular, the emergence and rapid expansion of new media (e.g., digital video recorders, tablets, and mobile devices) have introduced a myriad of complexities. Horton and Wohl (1956) originally conceptualized PSIs in the context of TV because the medium combined the capability for prolonged interaction with a media persona with the possibility of a media figure directly addressing the audience, mimicking face-to-face interaction. Increasingly though, viewers engage with TV programs outside of the traditional TV screen (e.g., online streaming), bringing attention to the fact that PSIs can occur in other media outlets. One discrepancy in prior PSI research is the distinction between PSIs and parasocial relationships (PSRs). Only recently have efforts been made to explicitly define PSRs as established cognitive relational schemata that are informed by PSIs (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Hartmann, Stuke, & Daschmann, 2008). Using this conceptualization, PSIs are specific instances of interaction and PSRs are long-term relationships that develop from, but also exist outside of, specific instances of interaction (e.g., via new media technologies). More current scholarship has also examined PSI with disliked media figures (Dibble & Rosaen, 2011), and even compared mediated relationships to nonmediated ones (e.g., characters in a theater) (Schramm & Wirth, 2010).

With respect to the new media climate, technologies, such as MP3 players, DVRs, and the Internet, not only allow for time shifting but also afford greater interactivity, allowing individuals to experience TV shows in new ways with the possibility of enhancing their PSRs. The term "enhanced TV" refers to the use of features on the Internet, particularly TV Web sites, to heighten one's viewing experience (Ha & Chan-Olmsted, 2002). Currently, almost every TV program has an official Web site that allows individuals to partake in a number of activities: fan-based features, including chat rooms and message boards, help build fan communities; game-based features, including quizzes and games, enable viewers to interact with program-related content; information-based features, such as producers' blogs and character biographies, provide viewers with more information about the program; and programming-based features, including full-length episodes and video clips, deliver program content to viewers online (Hurst, 2000). These TV Web site affordances are some of the program-related activities in which audiences may engage outside of the traditional TV viewing experience. These technological advances that facilitate PSRs could be impacted by the authenticity of media figures. As interactions with media figures become more robust, the proposed four-dimension classification scheme can be helpful in examining whether certain types of media figures result in greater PSRs in the new media landscape. This increase in media involvement may produce richer forms of gratification, such as enjoyment.

In light of the evolving media environment, technological affordances that encourage the maintenance of PSRs raise issues on the need to develop more effective tools to study PSIs. These tools should apply to media figures across a wide range of genres and outlets. Studies examining responses to characters in media offerings have often been limited to specific genres (e.g., King, 2000; Raney, 2002; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Rubin et al., 1985; Zillmann, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1989) and specific programs (e.g., Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Sood & Rogers, 2000; Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974). To address these limitations, this proposed classification scheme of media figures would help establish a more contemporary method of categorizing types of media figures, regardless of program type. Furthermore, such a taxonomy that is theoretically motivated by authenticity could invaluably ex-

plain variations in media engagement (both with the program and with the character), enjoyment, and long-term audience effects (e.g., program and character loyalty and behavior change). The proposed classification scheme that takes into account types of depiction, story, form, and traits is an attempt to parse out media figure differences and suggest that PSIs may be multidimensional in nature. Therefore, future research should indeed take advantage of this taxonomy and discover intricacies of PSIs with regard to their predictors, processes, and effects, which in turn could elucidate our understanding of the increasingly rich mediated relationships that viewers experience.

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