

Identification and Parasocial Relationships With Characters From *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*

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This study investigated identification and parasocial relationships (PSRs) with media characters by examining viewers' responses to the movie *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* through an online survey of 113 audience members who saw the film in a theater within a month of its release. Participants reported stronger PSR and identification with the more familiar characters from the first trilogy than with the new characters introduced in the film, although the association with identification was limited to older participants. Star Wars fandom was associated with identification and PSR for old and new characters. Familiarity with the earlier films was associated with PSR of old and new characters and with identification with the old characters. Participants were more likely to cite characters of the same gender as the one to which they felt most connected, but among the "most connected" newer characters a viewer-character gender match was not associated with stronger identification or PSR. Identification, but not PSR, with the story antagonist was associated with greater hedonic enjoyment and appreciation. Implications for audience responses to other transmedia narratives and for processes of audience reception in general are discussed.

Public Policy Relevance Statement

After watching *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, a sample of audience members tended to report a stronger sense of connection with characters from the first *Star Wars* trilogy than with new characters introduced in the film. Viewers were more likely to focus on characters of the same gender but, once a character was attended to, there was no difference between participants evaluating characters of the same versus opposite gender. Identification with the story's antagonist was associated with greater enjoyment and appreciation.

Keywords: parasocial interaction, parasocial relationships, identification, fandom

An important element of audiences' re-sponses to narrative media is their sense of connection to characters. A variety of theoretical perspectives have argued that when audiences feel connected to a media character or persona, it strengthens the effects of story exposure on a range of outcomes, including both affective outcomes such as enjoyment (Cohen,

2016; Igartua, 2010; Janicke & Raney, 2015) and cognitive outcomes such as persuasion or adoption of story—consistent beliefs (Bond & Drogos, 2014; Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003; de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2009, 2012; Hoeken, Kolthoff, & Sanders, 2016; Igartua & Vega Casanova, 2016; Rubin & Step, 2000; Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013). Some of these outcomes are evaluated positively. For example, the Temporarily Expanding the Boundaries of the Self (TEBOTS) model proposed by Slater, Johnson, Cohen, Comello, and Ewoldsen (2014) proposes that identifying with mediated characters allows individuals respite from the demands of maintaining personal identity and contributes to greater sympathy and understanding of people from stigmatized

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become muted as they identify with a character and experience the story from the character's perspective. Parasocial interaction (PSI) was first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956). PSI and PSRs have usually referred to a sense of having a virtual relationship. Audience members perceive media characters or personas as if they were someone they know, but do not lose awareness of their own identity.

Researchers have also distinguished between PSRs and the experience of PSI (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016; Hartmann & Gold-hoorn, 2011; Semmler, Loof, & Berke, 2015). An important distinguishing attribute is how long the sense of connection lasts. According to Dibble et al. (2016) and to Hartmann and Gold-hoorn (2011), PSI is best conceptualized as an illusion of interaction that occurs as the media content is processed by the audience member. This suggests it is likely to be strongest in relation to formats in which actors or media personas "break the fourth wall" and speak to the audience, as in the case of news anchors or many YouTube video bloggers. PSR, in contrast, extends beyond the time period when the material is being processed. It is a "longer-term association that may begin to develop during viewing, but also extends beyond the media exposure situation" (Dibble et al., 2016, p. 25). Although experiencing a sense of PSI during viewing might contribute to the development of PSR, it is not required. Audiences are able to develop a sense of connection with characters or persona when there is no direct address or illusion of interaction, as is the case in a typical narrative film or TV program (Dibble et al., 2016). It is this kind of virtual relationship that is relevant to *Star Wars*.

Furthermore, several scholars have argued that PSRs do not necessarily have to be positive (Hartmann, Stuke, & Daschmann, 2008; Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Just as individuals have real-world relationships with people they dislike or disapprove of, audience members may develop a sense of virtual connection to characters they dislike or whose behavior they would not condone. These characters may feel familiar and evoke interest and intense emotional reactions. However, the emotions may not be positive and may not match the valence of the character's feelings.

Although identification and PSR are similar in that they are both thought to facilitate the groups. Other outcomes evoke concern. For example, a developing line of research argues that identification with story protagonists that behave violently contributes to moral disengagement (Janicke & Raney, 2015; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016), which may lead to more acceptance of real-world immoral behavior. However, understanding these mechanisms can be challenging, in part because audiences' senses of connections with characters are complex and multifaceted.

This study seeks to contribute to understandings of the antecedents and implications of character engagement by focusing on two types of character connection, identification and parasocial relationships (PSRs), in relation to a specific, widely viewed movie, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. The movie's broad audience and unusual configuration of characters give it the potential to provide valuable insights on these aspects of audience engagement. Specifically, the inclusion of both well-established characters and new characters allows for the investigation of how familiarity is associated with identification and PSR. An underbilled heroine (Rey) allows for the investigation of how gender shapes the type and strength of audience connection with characters. Finally, the presence of a prominently featured, morally challenged antagonist (Kylo Ren) allows for the investigation of how an audience's sense of connection to a morally compromised character relates to enjoyment. The study concludes with a discussion of how insights drawn from this film might relate to audiences' responses to other narratives with similar characteristics.

Identification and PSRs

Both identification and PSR have been the subject of much previous research. However, use of the terms has been inconsistent, and there is debate about how each form of character connection is best conceptualized. Two attributes that are often seen to distinguish them from each other are the salience of the audience member's sense of self and the time frame in which the connection is thought to be active. According to Jonathan Cohen (2001), identification occurs as media is being processed and involves a merging of the perspectives of the audience and the media character or persona. Furthermore, audience members' senses of self

effects of story exposure, it is worthwhile to consider them as two distinct concepts. As discussed in more detail below, their antecedents are likely to differ. Furthermore, because the two concepts vary in the degree to which the audience's sense of self becomes less salient, the effects of media exposure on some out-comes may vary depending on whether the audiences' connection with the character takes the form of PSR or identification. For example, because the TEBOt's model (Slater et al., 2014) suggests that the benefits of narrative engagement derive from being able to temporarily let go of the demands of maintaining a sense of self, it is character identification, in which the sense of self becomes less salient, rather than PSR that is most likely to evoke this type of effect. As discussed in more detail below, identification and PSR may have different types of effects in relation to antiheroes or story antagonists.

Antecedents of Identification and PSR

Previous research suggests that several factors contribute to whether an audience member develops particular types of feelings of connection with characters and, if so, how strongly. These variables include attributes of the character such as whether they are portrayed as moral or good (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010) as well as attributes of the audience such as loneliness (Wang, Fink, & Cai, 2008) or trait empathy (Chory-Assad, & Cicchirillo, 2005). Another potential contributor is the audience member's familiarity with a character. PSRs are conceptualized as an orientation toward the character that spans different exposures. This suggests that PSR may build over time as an audience member gains more knowledge of the character. Audiences are therefore likely to have stronger PSRs with "older" characters who have appeared in earlier content. Identification, in contrast, is not conceptualized as existing outside of the time period when a text is processed. However, previous exposure to a character may facilitate identification by making it easier for audience members to imagine themselves in the character's place.

Furthermore, research about identification, to a greater extent than PSR, has considered how it is shaped by the narration or how the story is told. Researchers have been able to manipulate

identification in a written story, for example, by changing which character's perspective it is told from (de Graaf et al., 2009, 2012). Narratives of any medium may contribute to identification by filtering the information presented to the audience through a character's perspective (Chatman, 1990). For example, mystery stories often filter the information presented about the plot by focusing on the detective and revealing clues as he or she discovers them. These aspects of the narrative contribute to strong feelings of identification with new, unfamiliar characters provided that they are the focus or filter of the story.

The 2015 release of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* offers a valuable opportunity to study identification and PSR due to the unique combination of characters portrayed in the film. *Star Wars* was one of the first of something that is now a staple of the film industry: a multimedia franchise with characters that appear in different media and narratives. Other examples include the Harry Potter franchise and the Marvel cinematic universe. As a new installment in an established franchise, *The Force Awakens* includes established, iconic characters from the first *Star Wars* film trilogy such as Han Solo, Leia Organa, and Chewbacca. These characters have been part of popular culture for over 40 years. Most audience members know who they are and many audience members are likely to have strong established PSRs with them. *The Force Awakens* was released 10 years after the last major film in the series. It was highly anticipated and broke the previous record for overall box office revenue within three weeks of release (Box Office Mojo, n.d.), suggesting it drew viewers who were relatively new to the franchise. Although the *Star Wars* fan base is large, it is unlikely that dedicated fans alone could have accounted for that number of ticket sales. The audience inevitably included those who are deeply involved in the fan community and those who think fondly of the original films. However, the numbers suggest that the movie also drew those who had relatively little previous familiarity with the franchise itself, but were drawn by the publicity surrounding the new movie. This makes the movie ideal for this type of study in that the audience will have varied in their levels of familiarity and emotional connection to the previous material.

Furthermore, most of the movie's screen time and narrative focus are devoted to the new characters, such as Finn, Rey, and Kylo Ren. All viewers who are watching the movie for the first time have the opportunity to develop new PSRs with them. The movie, therefore, represents an opportunity to consider some of the distinguishing characteristics of identification and PSR. It contains both characters that viewers may already know, which allows for the investigation of how familiarity and knowledge drawn from previous experience with the characters contributes to the further development of PSR and to current identification, as well as new characters, which allows for the investigation of how PSR and identification arise within a single narrative.

The theoretical conceptualization of PSR suggests that this type of character connection will, on average, be felt more strongly with the characters from the first film trilogy (*A New Hope*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Return of the Jedi*) than those introduced in the new film. Furthermore, because PSR is thought to develop across exposures, viewers' familiarity with the first-released trilogy and fanship with the *Star Wars* franchise will be positively associated with their level of PSR with these older characters.

H1: PSR will be higher for characters from the first film trilogy than for characters introduced in *The Force Awakens*.

H2: PSR with the older characters will be positively associated with viewers' familiarity with the first film trilogy.

H3: PSR with the older characters will be positively associated with fanship for the *Star Wars* franchise.

Also investigated was whether familiarity and fanship was associated with PSR with new characters in order to see whether this background knowledge facilitated the development of an ongoing sense of connection with newly encountered characters.

RQ1: Is viewers' familiarity with the first film trilogy positively associated with their PSR with the new characters in the film?

RQ2: Is viewers' fanship for the franchise positively associated with their PSR with the new characters in the film?

Identification, however, may show a different pattern. The movie's plot focuses more closely on the newly introduced characters than on those from the first trilogy in that the story is structured to present the plot largely from the newer characters' perspectives. For example, the audience encounters the characters from the first trilogy only when they are met by the newer characters. This suggests that audience members might be more likely to identify with these characters as they watch, despite greater familiarity with the characters from the first trilogy. This leads to the next research questions.

RQ3: Will identification be stronger for characters introduced in *The Force Awakens* than for characters from the first trilogy?

RQ4: Is viewers' familiarity with the original trilogy positively associated with identification with either the new or old characters?

RQ5: Is viewers' fanship for the franchise positively associated with identification with either the new or old characters?

Gender and Character Connection

Another unusual aspect of *The Force Awakens* is how gender interacts with traditional genre tropes, characters, and plot devices. This is relevant to another potential antecedent of identification and PSR—similarity between an audience member and character (Cohen, 2001; de Graaf, 2014; Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Audience-character similarity can be evaluated on many dimensions. An obvious dimension that has been previously considered, albeit with mixed results, is gender. Some previous research has found that audiences tend to attend to or favor characters of their own gender over characters of a different gender. For example, Oatley (1999) describes a study in which a sample of high school students were asked to read either a short story focused on a female protagonist or a different story focused on a male protagonist. Then, they were asked to indicate the number of emotions they felt while reading. Male participants reported a feeling a wider range of emotions when reading the story with the male protagonist. Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) asked a sample of young adults

to indicate how much they desired to be like their favorite male and female character. They found that both men and women reported greater wishful identification for same-gender characters. Hoffner (1996) asked a sample of schoolchildren to evaluate their level of wishful identification and PSR with their favorite character. She found that 91% of the boys and 53% of the girls identified a character of the same gender as their favorite. She also found that girls who were evaluating female characters reported stronger wishful identification and PSR than those evaluating male characters. For many, this trend is troubling given the underrepresentation of female characters in the media, particularly in strong, dynamic, and prominent roles. The concern is that because audience members are more likely to focus on characters of the same gender, women and girls will suffer from a relative dearth of the positive role models. Therefore, they will not have access to the positive influence that this type of identification may bring.

Other research, however, has found that a gender discrepancy between an audience member and a character does not always lead to a decreased sense of connection provided that the characters are prominent and appealing. In Oatley's (1999) study there was no difference among the female participants in the range of the emotions they felt when reading a story with a female versus a male protagonist. De Graaf and Hustinx (2011) carried out an experiment in which they manipulated the gender of a character in a persuasive narrative. Participants who were exposed to a story with a main character who was of their own gender did not rate the character as more similar or report more identification than those assigned a version with a character of the opposite gender.

The Force Awakens provides an interesting case study in this regard in that it has both a positive female and a positive male protagonist with similar amounts of screen time in Rey and Finn. However, it is the female character, Rey, who follows the traditional "heroic" arc exemplified in the first trilogy by Luke Skywalker. She is the one who defeats the new antagonist in the climactic battle and is identified as the heir to both Skywalker's weapon and his skill. She is the force that most obviously awakens. This raises questions regarding how male and female audiences responded when presented with a fe-

male character in a strong, leading role. Furthermore, in contrast to other recent movies such as *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* trilogies, *The Force Awakens* was not marketed or promoted as a film with a female hero,¹ which suggests that it might have drawn audience members that may not have sought out a heroine-focused story. This offers an unusual opportunity to investigate the potential roles of audience and protagonist gender with a sample that has not self-selected to watch a movie centered on a female character. The research described above lead to the following hypothesis and research questions.

H4: Participants will be more likely to select characters of the same gender as the one to which they feel the strongest connection.

RQ6: Does the strength of viewers' PSR with characters vary depending on whether the viewer and the character are of the same gender?

RQ7: Does the strength of viewers' identification with characters vary depending on whether the viewer and the character are of the same gender?

Identification, PSR, and Antiheroes

As noted above, one of the reasons that identification and PSR are thought to be important is that they are associated with more global evaluations of the media consumption experience, including enjoyment. Enjoyment, in turn, can shape whether audiences return to the media content in the future, something that is vitally important to media producers and that should be relevant to scholars interested in long-term media effects. However, the ways in which these two forms of character connection are related to enjoyment may be particularly nuanced in rela-

¹ Rey was promoted as a main character in the film's marketing. However, these materials tended to obscure her eventual role as the new the Jedi and Luke Skywalker's heir. For example, she is never shown with a lightsaber in any of the previews, despite the fact that she is the one that uses one to defeat Kylo Ren in the climactic fight sequence. In fact, the absence of Rey from much the merchandising created controversy and spawned a Twitter hashtag (#wheresrey), after the film's release (Cunha, 2016; Pasquarelli, 2016).

tion to characters that are not perceived as admirable, such as villains or antiheroes. Identification and PSR tend to decrease when a character or persona is perceived as immoral (Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016; Tal-Or & Co-hen, 2010). However, immoral behavior on the part of a character does not completely preclude various forms of character connection (Janicke & Raney, 2015; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016), and there is evidence that when these connections occur, they relate to story enjoyment. However, previous research and theory regarding audiences' connection to characters that engage in immoral behavior suggest different predictions depending on the character's role in the narrative. Examining responses to this kind of character, therefore, has the potential to widen our understanding of audience reception of media narratives.

One perspective on identification with anti-heroes or antagonists grows from affective disposition theory (Raney, 2004; Zillman & Cantor, 1977). This perspective initially focused on stories in which immoral characters are villains placed in opposition to morally good characters. The first *Star Wars* film, with its characters fighting on the light and dark sides of the force, is an example. The audience is thought to align with the virtuous team of Luke and Obi-Wan against the evil represented by Darth Vader. They hope for Luke's triumph and Vader's defeat. According to this perspective, enjoyment of these kinds of stories is highest when the audiences' affective dispositions are strong and are consistent with the story's outcome. Therefore, identification with losing villains should be associated with less enjoyment because the audience is more likely to feel the negative emotions of their defeat.

However, the associations between identification, PSR, and enjoyment in relation to not-completely moral characters become more complicated when a narrative's moral structure is more ambiguous and when one considers that not all forms of enjoyment are exclusively hedonic. Even in broadly sketched, action narratives the lines between light and dark are not always clearly delineated, either because the protagonists of the story engage in problematic behavior, as in the case of characters like Batman, Deadpool, or the Suicide Squad, or the antagonists have enough appeal of some sort (e.g., relatable motives, redeeming characteris-

tics, charisma) to allow the audience to forge a sense of connection with them, as in the case of Magneto from the X-men series, Severus Snape of the Harry Potter series, Catwoman from the world of Batman, and Yondu from the first *Guardians of the Galaxy*. This ambiguity, in concert with the ideas that PSRs or identification with characters can become stronger over time and that narrative schema cue audiences to be positively disposed toward characters that are a story's focus (Raney, 2004), suggests that these forms of character connection develop in relation to characters whose behavior would generally be rejected by the audience (Janicke & Raney, 2015; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016). For example, Janicke and Raney (2015) found identification with a morally ambiguous, violent TV character to be associated with greater hedonic enjoyment even though, among fans, ratings of the character's morality and attractiveness were negatively associated with enjoyment. They suggest that identification softened the viewers' discomfort with the character's behavior and facilitated enjoyment.

This potential for identification or PSR with these characters who exhibit immoral behaviors is further expanded when one considers forms of enjoyment that are not based primarily in positive emotions. For example, researchers such as Oliver and Bartsch (2010, 2011) suggest that in addition to hedonic enjoyment, audiences can experience appreciation. Appreciation is a gratification associated with a sense of meaningfulness or human connection. Whereas the primary emotions associated with hedonic enjoyment are positive in valence, appreciation is associated with a mix of positive and negative emotions, including sadness and tenderness. Others have suggested that the gratifications offered by the media should be conceptualized not only in terms of the emotions they evoke, but also the needs they gratify, including needs for human connection (Tamborini et al., 2010) or escape from the constraints of one's own self-identity (Slater et al., 2014). Both of these perspectives suggest that connections to immoral or losing characters may provide gratifications for the audience provided they evoke a sense of meaning, connection, or an expanded sense of self. Narratives in which an immoral or dislikeable character reveal something about the human condition or provide a moral insight may

evoke these gratifications, which are likely to be facilitated by identification and PSR.

The Force Awakens introduces a new antagonist in Kylo Ren who makes an interesting case study to examine these dynamics. He is given a substantive amount of screen time and has his own story arc. Although initially presented as the new Darth Vader, the character turns out to be less the enigmatic, assured killer that Vader represented in the original film, and more of a petulant adolescent struggling for independence and authority. He is shown as committing reprehensible acts while being internally conflicted, wracked with indecision, and manipulated a more powerful character. In the end, he survives and actively commits to the “dark side,” but the plot he is serving is at least temporarily foiled and he is beaten in the final, climactic duel. This suggests two potential patterns of results in relation to the impact of identification and PSR, depending on the extent to which he functions for an audience member as a villain one loves to hate or as somewhat sympathetic antihero. As a losing villain, identification should be associated with less hedonic enjoyment. As a relatable antihero with a lot of screen time, both identification and PSR may contribute to enjoyment and appreciation. This leads to the following research questions.

RQ8: How does PSR with the movie’s antagonist relate to enjoyment and appreciation?

RQ9: How does identification with the movie’s antagonist relate to enjoyment and appreciation?

Methodology

Participants and Procedures

Data were gathered through an online survey between the last week of January and second week of February in 2016, about a month after *The Force Awakens* was released in theaters. Participants were recruited from undergraduate communication classes at a Midwestern, urban university in exchange for a modest amount of extra credit. A snowball sampling component was also used in which students were able to recruit other adults to participate. Prospective participants were sent a link to the survey, in which the initial page explained the study and asked for informed consent. Those who indi-

cated they had never seen the film were told they were not eligible. All others were sent on to the survey itself. Cases were eliminated from the dataset if the raised too many quality control flags,² which included a set of comprehension measures regarding the movie’s plot.

One hundred and thirteen participants completed the survey and submitted usable data. Fifty-two percent were female. The average age was 26.46 ($SD = 8.71$). The median was 23, indicating that the sample was not distributed normally by age. As one would expect from a college-based sample, younger adults were overrepresented. Sixty-four percent of the respondents were between 18 and 25. Seventy-three percent of the respondents were White, 12% were African American, and six percent were Asian. The rest were either multiracial, some other race, or declined the question. Four percent identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino.

Twenty-seven percent saw the film opening weekend and another 21% reported seeing it after opening weekend, but within the first week of its release. Another 20% reported seeing the film in the second week of release. The rest saw it after the second week but before the survey was administered about a month after the initial release. Eighty-two percent reported seeing it only once. Twelve percent had seen it twice, and 4% reported seeing it three or more times.

After participants completed questions about where they saw the movie, they completed a series of Likert-type questions that included measures of two forms of enjoyment. This was followed by up to three blocks of questions containing the measures of identification and PSR. The order of the first two blocks was randomly distributed across participants so that half the participants evaluated one of the older characters first and a newer character second,

² These flags included missing more than one of the three comprehension questions dealing with the plot, missing either of two measures of attention to the survey that asked the participants to click a specific value, completing the survey in less than 10 min or longer than 45 min, or being one of several surveys from the same URL in a short time period. As individual flags do not necessarily indicate the survey was not completed in good faith (e.g., two submissions from the same URL could be multiple roommates or family members submitting the survey rather than multiple submissions from the same person), cases were excluded only if they raised more than one flag.

whereas the other participants evaluated one of the newer characters first and an older character second. Half the participants were first asked to identify the character they “felt the strongest connection with” from a list of three characters featured in both the first trilogy and the new movie: Chewbacca, Han Solo, or Leia. An image of character as they appeared in the movie was presented with their name to help participants identify the characters. These participants were then asked to complete measures of identification and strength of PSR. Next, they were asked to select the character they “felt the strongest connection with” from a list of characters introduced with *The Force Awakens*: Finn, Kylo Ren, and Rey. Again, images of each character were presented with their name. The other half of the participants completed the same measures, but the order in which the characters selected and rated was reversed. Overall, among the older characters, 26% of the participants chose Chewbacca, 13% chose Leia, and 61% chose Han Solo. Among the newer characters, 30% chose Finn, 19% chose Kylo Ren, and 51% chose Rey.

Participants who selected Kylo Ren, the antagonist of the film, as the newer character they felt most connected with moved directly to the following measures after evaluating one newer and one older character. They evaluated two characters. However, participants who selected and rated a different newer character were next asked to evaluate Kylo Ren by completing the measures of identification and PSR for a final time. They evaluated three characters. At the end of the survey all participants completed measures of their level of fanship for the franchise, their previous exposure to *Star Wars* related media, and demographic characteristics.

Measures

Parasocial relationship. Strength of PSR was measured through 12 items adapted from previous research (Barriga, 2011; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Hartmann et al., 2008). The items were selected for inclusion in the questionnaire if they were consistent with recent conceptualizations of PSR as an ongoing sense of interest in a character that is distinct from identification. Exploratory factor analyses were carried out in reference to the older and newer characters, and items were included in the final

scale if they loaded cleanly on a single factor in reference to both character sets. Items from the original scales that suggested a merging of the perspective of the viewer and the character, or that referenced an affective evaluation of the character as likable or comfortable were excluded.³ Participants were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the items on a scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach’s alpha was .94 for the older characters, .92 for the newer characters, and .93 for ratings of Kylo Ren. The means of the items were used for the final scales. The analyses for Kylo Ren included the 21 participants who selected the character as the one they felt closest to as well as the participants who were prompted to evaluate the character at the end of the survey.

Identification. To measure identification with each of their chosen characters, participants were asked to think about the character and complete five items from Tal-Or and Cohen (2010) about “how you felt when watching the movie” on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Example items include “I tended to understand the reasons why the character did what they did” and “While viewing the movie, I felt the emotions this character portrayed.” The scales were reliable, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .93 for the older characters, .89 for newer characters, and .88 for Kylo Ren. The means of the five items were used for the final scales, with means for Kylo Ren including those who selected the character to rate as well as those who were prompted to do so.

Fanship. Fanship was measured with three items adapted from Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) Sports Spectator’s Identification Scale (SSIS), which was developed to measure the strength of fan identification with sports teams. The scale was selected because it is concise, has been consistently reliable in previous studies, and focuses specifically on fanship with something

³ The items were: I have looked forward to watching this character in new movies; If this character appeared in a new movie, I would watch it; This character seems to understand things that I want to know; I would miss character if he or she did not appear in future movies; I feel sorry for this character when they make a mistake; I would like to meet this character in person; If I saw a story about this character in a magazine or online, I would read it; I feel I know this character very well; I would like to know more about this character; I am interested in this character; I find this character fascinating; This character is engaging to watch.

that is mediated (i.e., a team or story one knows primarily as an audience member) rather than more general fandom that might be directed toward an activity or hobby.

Respondents were told that the questions were about “*Star Wars* as a series or franchise—including all the movies and other *Star Wars* stories you might have seen or read—rather than just *The Force Awakens*.” They were asked to indicate how strongly they saw themselves as a fan of *Star Wars*, how strongly their friends saw them as a fan of *Star Wars*, and how important being a fan of *Star Wars* was to them. Response options ranged from 1 to 8. The reliability of the items was .91, with a mean of 4.55 ($SD = 2.16$), indicating a moderate level of fandom.

Familiarity. The questionnaire also included measures of participants’ exposure to the first *Star Wars* film trilogy. They were asked to indicate whether they had seen each film on a scale that ranged from 0 *never seen it* to 3 *seen it three times or more*. An index was created by summing these items that ranged from 0 to 9. The mean was 5.08 ($SD = 3.43$).

Enjoyment and appreciation. Scales from Oliver and Bartsch (2010) were used to measure two forms of enjoyment: hedonic enjoyment and appreciation. Each scale has three items. An example from the hedonic enjoyment scale was “It is fun for me to watch this movie,” and an example of the appreciation scale was “I find this movie to be very meaningful.” The response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 10 (*strongly agree*). Previous work has found the scales to factor consistently and to be reliable (Hall & Zwarun, 2012; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). The Cronbach’s alpha for the hedonic enjoyment scale was .94, whereas the alpha for the appreciation scale was .90. The mean for hedonic enjoyment scale, 8.40 ($SD = 1.94$) was higher than that of the appreciation scale, 6.50 ($SD = 2.29$). However, both were in the upper half of the scale range, suggesting that the movie tended to be both enjoyed and appreciated.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses were carried out to evaluate factors that might contribute to character connection and which should be taken into account in the primary analyses. There were no significant differences between male and female participants in either their reported levels of PSR or identification with either the old or new sets of characters. However, men reported significantly higher PSR with Kylo Ren, $M = 4.42$ ($SD = 1.47$), than their female counterparts, $M = 3.73$ ($SD = 1.39$), $t(111) = -2.59$, $p = .01$. There were no differences in identification with this character.

There was no evidence of a linear association between the participants’ age and identification or PSR. The correlations between age and the identification and PSR scales for both the older and newer character sets, as well as with Kylo Ren specifically, were nonsignificant. However, tests were also run to check for a nonlinear, cohort-driven association between age and tendencies to become engaged with the characters. Participants in their 20s would have been teens or teenagers when the more recent trilogy (Episodes I–III), whose characters were not included in *Force Awakens*, was released. Those who were older would have known just the first trilogy (Episodes IV–VI) when they were younger. Given that one of the franchise’s primary audiences has always been children and teens, it is likely that some component of adult audiences’ connection with the characters involves nostalgia related to seeing the films when young. These sorts of associations could be obscured by tests of linear associations, particularly given that the sample was not normally distributed in terms of age. Therefore, participants were divided into those who were 29 or younger and those who were older. T tests found no significant difference between the two age-groups in relation to identification with the older characters, newer characters, or with Kylo Ren. However, there was a significant difference between cohorts in relation to PSR with newer characters, $t(110) = -2.04$, $p = .04$. The younger cohort reported stronger PSR, $M = 5.31$ ($SD = 1.80$), than their older counterparts, $M = 4.75$ ($SD = 1.24$). There was no difference in PSR relation to the older characters or Kylo Ren.

T tests were also carried out to see if there were significant differences in the level of PSR or identification among those who were White and those who identified with another racial group. There were no significant differences in any of the identification measures. However, White participants reported a stronger sense of PSR with the older

characters, $t(111) = 2.23, p = .03; M_{White} = 5.69$ ($SD = 1.23$), $M_{non-White} = 5.12$ ($SD = 1.24$), and with Kylo Ren, $t(111) = 2.40, p = .02; M_{White} = 4.25$ ($SD = 1.47$), $M_{non-White} = 3.55$ ($SD = 1.36$). There was no difference in PSR in relation to newer characters. There were not enough non-White participants in the sample to test for differences across other racial groups.

Star Wars fanship and familiarity with the first film trilogy were correlated, $r = .71, p < .001$. In order to avoid issues of multicollinearity, separate analyses were run for each of the two variables, rather than including them in the same regression models.

Antecedents of PSR and Identification

H1 predicted that participants would report higher levels of PSR for the characters from the first trilogy than for characters introduced in *The Force Awakens*. A within-subjects ANOVA compared PSR with the older characters to PSR with newer ones and included both the participants' age cohort and race as across-subjects factors. There was significant difference, *Wilks's* $\Lambda = .93, F(1, 108) = 8.30, p = .005$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$. There were no significant one-way or two-way interactions with cohort or race. As hypothesized, the overall mean for the older characters, $M = 5.54$ ($SD = 1.26$), was higher than the mean for the newer characters, $M = 5.19$ ($SD = 1.21$). *H1*, therefore, was supported. The participants reported higher levels of PSR for characters from the first trilogy than for those introduced in the new film.

H2 and *H3* predicted that PSR with the older characters would be positively associated with the viewers' familiarity with the characters and with their fanship for the franchise. RQ1 and RQ2 asked whether this would also be true in relation to the newer characters. Sets of regression analyses were carried out with demographic control variables entered in the first step and measures of either familiarity or fanship entered in the second. As reported in Table 1, the amount of explained variance in the model predicting PSR with the older characters was significantly increased by including either the measure of familiarity with the original trilogy, $\Delta R^2 = .12, F(1, 108) = 15.64, p < .001$, or the fanship scale, $\Delta R^2 = .27, F(1, 108) = 42.93, p < .001$. There was a positive association between both familiarity and fanship and PSR

Table 1
Final Standardized Regression Coefficients
Predicting PSR With Older and Newer Force
Awakens Characters

Variable	Older characters		Newer characters	
Step 1				
Younger age cohort	.12	.15	.21*	.23*
Non-white	-.10	-.70	-.01	-.02
Step 2				
Fanship	.53***	—	.52***	—
Step 2				
Familiarity	—	.37***	—	.27***
Total R^2	.30	.17	.31	.11

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

with the older character, which supports both *H2* and *H3*. Including either measure also significantly increased the explained variance for the model predicting PSR with the newer characters, familiarity: $\Delta R^2 = .06, F(1, 108) = 39.91, p = .006$; fanship: $\Delta R^2 = .26, F(1, 108) = 39.91, p < .001$ (see Table 1). These variables were also associated with greater PSR. For both sets of characters, fanship seemed to be more closely related to PSR in that it explained more variance than familiarity.

RQ3 asked whether identification would be higher for the characters introduced in *The Force Awakens* than for the characters that also appeared in the first trilogy. Another within-subjects ANOVA was carried out that compared identification with the older characters to identification with newer ones. The impact of the type of character was significant, *Wilks's* $\Lambda = .94, F(1, 108) = 6.52, p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$. There was a significant one-way interaction with age cohort, *Wilks's* $\Lambda = .97, F(1, 108) = 3.94, p = .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. The participants' race did not interact with the character type. The overall mean for the older characters, $M = 5.63$ ($SD = 1.19$), was larger than the mean for the newer characters, $M = 5.40$ ($SD = 1.15$). However, this difference was largely driven by the evaluations of older participants in the sample. As shown in Figure 1, the mean identification level with older and newer characters was similar among the younger cohort of participants. The mean in relation to the older characters was 5.59 ($SD = 1.20$), whereas the mean in relation to the newer characters was 5.47 ($SD = 1.10$). However, the difference was

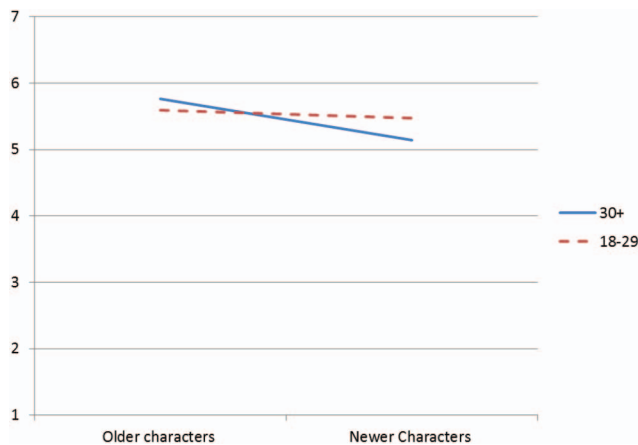


Figure 1. Interaction between participants' age and identification with older and newer characters. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

greater among the older participant cohort, in which the mean for the older characters was 5.77 ($SD = 1.15$) and the mean for the newer characters was 5.14 ($SD = 1.32$). This suggests that whereas the younger participants tended to identify with the older and newer characters at similar levels, the older participants tended to identify more strongly with the older, more familiar characters.

RQ4 and RQ5 dealt with whether identification was associated with familiarity and fanship, respectively. Another set of hierarchical regression analyses was carried out to investigate these questions. Again, demographic control variables were entered in the first step and measures of either familiarity or fanship were added in the second. As reported in Table 2, the amount of explained variance in relation to the model predicting identification with the older characters was significantly increased by including either the measure of familiarity with the original trilogy, $\Delta R^2 = .11$, $F(1, 108) = 12.90$, $p < .001$, or the fanship scale, $\Delta R^2 = .21$, $F(1, 108) = 28.78$, $p < .001$. Greater familiarity and stronger fanship were associated with identification with the older characters. Including the fanship scale also significantly increased the explained variance for the model predicting identification with the newer characters, $\Delta R^2 = .09$, $F(1, 108) = 10.28$, $p = .002$. However, familiarity with the original trilogy did not significantly improve the model, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F(1, 108) = 1.79$, $p = .18$. Familiarity, therefore, was not strongly related to identification with the

newer characters, which contrasts with the findings in relation to PSR (see Table 2).

Gender and Character Involvement

H4 predicted that participants would be disproportionately likely to nominate characters of the same gender as the character with which they felt the strongest connection. Chi-square analyses supported this prediction. In the case of the older characters, only 4% ($n = 2$) of the male participants nominated Leia, the one female character in the group, whereas 22% of the female participants did so. This is significantly different from what would be predicted by chance, $\chi^2(2, 113) = 10.48$, $p = .005$. A

Table 2
Final Standardized Regression Coefficients
Predicting Identification With Older and Newer
Force Awakens Characters

Variable	Older characters		New characters	
Step 1				
Younger age cohort	-.05	-.02	.13	.14
Non-white	-.02	.02	-.04	-.05
Step 2				
Fanship	.46***	—	.30**	—
Step 2				
Familiarity	—	.35***	—	.14
Total R^2	.22	.12	.11	.04

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

larger proportion of male participants, 35%, selected the female character among the newer characters (Rey) as the character with which they felt the strongest connection. However, 66% of the female participants did so. Again, this is significantly different from what one would expect from chance, $\chi^2(2, 113) = 11.6$, $p = .003$.

RQ6 and RQ7 asked whether the participants' feelings of PSR and identification, respectively, would vary depending on whether the character they were evaluating was of the same gender or not. The subsample of participants who evaluated opposite-gender, older characters consisted almost entirely of men, confounding participant gender with viewer-character similarity. Therefore, this analysis was limited to evaluations of newer characters in which there was a more even gender distribution across groups. *T* tests found no difference in the PSR scale between those rating characters of the same gender, $M = 5.17$ ($SD = 1.19$), and those rating a character of the opposite gender, $M = 5.17$ ($SD = 1.31$), $t(111) = -.02$, $p = .98$. Similarly, there was not a significant difference in the identification scale between those rating characters of the same gender, $M = 5.29$ ($SD = 1.21$), and those rating a character of the opposite gender, $M = 5.63$ ($SD = 1.00$), $t(111) = 1.53$, $p = .13$. Another pair of hierarchical regression analyses was carried out to ensure that there were not differences in PSR or identification in relation to newer characters that were masked by differences in how participants of different demographic groups responded to the characters. In each analysis, participant gender, race, age cohort, and fanship were entered the first step and a dummy variable indicating whether the character was of the same gender as the viewer was entered in the second step. Neither analysis indicated that a viewer-character match was associated significantly with greater character connection. The change in the explained variance for identification was .03, $F(1, 106) = 3.25$, $p = .07$, $\beta = -.16$, whereas the change in the explained variance for PSR was $<.01$, $F(1, 106) = .55$, $p = .46$, $\beta = -.06$. The study provided no evidence, therefore, that strength of PSR and identification with favored characters was stronger when the character and the participant were of the same gender.

Character Involvement With Kylo Ren

RQ8 and RQ9 asked whether PSR and identification with Kylo Ren were associated with enjoyment. In order to investigate these questions, a pair of regression analyses was carried out, one for each of the two measured dimensions of enjoyment (hedonic enjoyment and appreciation). Participant gender, race, age cohort, and fanship were entered in the first step, followed by the PSR and identification measures for the character in the second. In the case of hedonic enjoyment, adding the second step to the model significantly increased the explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = .07$, $F(2, 105) = 5.23$, $p = .005$. As noted in Table 3, this was attributable to the identification scale, which was a significant predictor in the final model. The analysis of appreciation showed a similar pattern. Adding the character engagement variables to the model significantly increased the explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = .04$, $F(2, 105) = 3.34$, $p = .04$, and identification was a significant predictor in the final model. The results suggest, therefore, that identification with Kylo Ren was associated with both greater hedonic enjoyment and greater appreciation after controlling for demographics and fanship.

Discussion

This study took advantage of the release of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, with its varied audience and unusual configuration of characters, to address three issues related to audiences' sense of connection to media characters. First, it

Table 3
Final Standardized Regression Coefficients
Predicting Hedonic Enjoyment and Appreciation

Variable	Hedonic enjoyment	Appreciation
Step 1		
Younger age cohort	-.02	.04
Non-white	-.06	.08
Male	-.02	-.02
Fanship	.49***	.58***
Step 2		
Identification with antagonist	.20*	.20*
PSR with antagonist	.11	.01
Total R^2	.38	.39

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

investigated the distinction between PSR and identification by comparing the antecedents of these two variables in relation to established versus newly introduced characters. Second, it examined how viewer-character similarity in terms of gender related to the viewer's sense of connection with the character in the context of a narrative that contained an unusually prominent and dynamic heroine. Finally, it considered how identification and PSR with an antagonist related to story enjoyment and appreciation. Each of these topics is discussed below.

The study considered how previous experience with media characters shapes identification and PSR. Of the two, PSR is the concept that theory suggests is most directly affected by audiences' familiarity with the character because it is thought to develop over time and extend across different exposures. This suggests that audiences would report, on average, stronger PSRs with characters from the previous trilogy and that PSR would be associated with familiarity with the original films. The data were consistent with these predictions. Furthermore, the new movie took place in a fictional "universe" defined by the previous films in which the history, politics, mythology, and social structure of the narrative world remained consistent. Therefore, it was reasonable to ask whether familiarity with and investment in that narrative world might make it easier for audiences to forge a sense of connection with newly introduced characters. Familiarity and fandom were associated with PSR with the new characters, which is consistent with this idea.

The proposed relationship between previous experience with a character and identification is less direct. Greater familiarity with a character is thought to make it easier to take on the characters' perspective while watching, thus facilitating identification. The respondents reported greater identification with the older characters, particularly among the participants in the older age cohort. Viewers who were under 30 reported little difference in the identification levels across the two types of characters. Furthermore, both familiarity with the films in which the older characters appeared and fandom with the *Star Wars* franchise were associated with identification with the older characters, which is consistent with the perspective that familiarity makes identification easier. The results in relation to identification with the newer characters were more complex. Identification was associated with strength of the participants' investment in the franchise. However, the relationship between identification and familiarity with the original films was smaller and nonsignificant. This suggests that enthusiasm for *Star Wars* may have either motivated viewers to take on the new characters' perspectives or made it easier for them to do so. However, previous exposure to the earlier films themselves did not seem to facilitate this type of identification. The story of the new movie, which was told primarily from the new characters' perspective, may have provided enough cues for the audience to be able to follow the plot from their viewpoint without detailed knowledge of the earlier films.

The study also found participants were disproportionately likely to select characters of the same gender as the one they felt the closest connection with, which is consistent with other research (Hoffner, 1996). However, it also found that when a viewer connected with a character that was featured prominently in the story, the lack of a gender match did not reduce identification or PSR. Previous researchers have argued that audience/character similarity based on personality, attitudes, or circumstances may be more powerful contributors to character engagement than similarity based on shared demographics. For example, Hoffner and Buchanan (2000) found that viewers' perceptions of their attitudinal similarity to their favorite character were associated with stronger PSR, whereas perceptions of similarity of background were not. The potential of audiences to develop a strong sense of connection to characters with which they differ on demographic characteristics also speaks to the potential of perspectives such as the Temporarily Expanding the Boundaries of the Self model (Slater et al., 2014) and Schiappa's Parasocial Contact Hypothesis (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005), which argue that connections with characters who are socially distant from the viewer might decrease perceptions of social distance across groups and reduce prejudice.

Finally, the study found that identification, but not PSR, with the antagonist Kylo Ren was associated with greater hedonic enjoyment and with greater meaning. At first blush, the finding that identification was associated with more enjoyment seems counter the original principles of affective disposition theory (Raney, 2004, 2011), which suggested that stories should usu-

ally be more enjoyable the more the audience distanced themselves from an immoral and losing character. In this case, any negative emotions that might be evoked through identification with Kylo Ren as he is defeated may have been outweighed by other gratifications, such as the sense of being able to escape the constraints of the audiences' own perspective (Slater et al., 2014).

The association between identification and appreciation suggests being able to understand Kylo Ren's perspective contributed to viewers' sense of the story's meaning. It might be that feeling temporarily invested in the character, who was the most morally conflicted in the film, contributed to greater understandings of people or allowed them to consider their own moral conflict (Oliver & Bartsch, 2011; Oliver, Hartmann, & Woolley, 2012). In addition, much of the audience may anticipate that the character will return in sequels and may not be confident that his alliance with evil is permanent. This is, after all, a narrative world in which even Darth Vader famously returned to the light. They may be interpreting Kylo Ren's story as the first part of a redemption narrative, which could also contribute to a sense of meaning.

The study inevitably has limitations. It addresses the role of gender in participants' responses to a female protagonist. However, *The Force Awakens* was also notable in featuring a positive Black protagonist. This offered the potential to investigate how viewer-character similarity in terms of race might affect character focus and identification, particularly for viewers of color, who are also relatively unlikely to see themselves onscreen in prominent, positive roles. Regrettably, this potential could not be fulfilled in the current study given the relatively small number of Black or African American participants. However, the topic deserves further study and the fact that it could not be pursued here illustrates some of the limitations of a convenience sample.

In addition, participants were forced to select old and new characters to rate from choices provided by the researcher. Although the choices included the characters from each category with the most screen time, some participants may have nominated other characters such as Poe Dameron, Maz Kanata, or C-3PO if they had been given the opportunity to do so. The results might have been different if they had been allowed a wider range of choices.

Furthermore, *The Force Awakens* is not a typical movie. Few films could be more highly anticipated or have a more widely recognizable pedigree. It was big, in terms of its budget, its revenue, and its place in popular culture. This suggests that one should be cautious and thoughtful about generalizing these findings to other content. Characters with the generational resonance of Han Solo or Leia Organa are rare. Some of the findings, such as the tendency of viewers who grew up with these characters to identify strongly with them despite relatively short screen time, might be a relatively unique reflection of this.

However, this does not mean that audience responses to *The Force Awakens* can tell us nothing about responses to other narratives or about reception processes in general. Many aspects of the film's uniqueness are of degree rather than kind. For example, there are other media franchises that build upon the same kind of established, fictional universe as *Star Wars*, including the Harry Potter series and the Marvel cinematic universe. Some of the findings have the potential to speak to audience's engagement with characters that are part of other transmedia narratives. They suggest that previous familiarity and engagement with a particular narrative world facilitates PSR with characters featured in those worlds. Furthermore, they may also contribute to feelings of identification with those characters in new narratives, particularly when the viewers are older and thus have a long history with the narrative world.

Furthermore, the other content elements highlighted in this study represent ongoing trends or narrative tropes. Rey is notable because she appeared in a film that was targeted toward a general audience and because she took the lead rather than appearing as part of an ensemble. However, there are other examples of dynamic female characters such as Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games*, Wonder Woman of DC's competing franchise, and Jyn Erso of *Rogue One*. The financial success of *The Force Awakens* may allow these characters to become more common. The findings suggest that these types of characters may be particularly likely to be noticed by female viewers, but that both male and female audiences can develop a strong sense of connection with them.

Furthermore, the agonized Kylo Ren whose future allegiance is in doubt also has predecessors, including Severus Snape, Magneto, as well as Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader from the earlier *Star Wars* films. The results suggest that being able to identify with these antagonists' perspectives during at least portions of the narrative experience may facilitate enjoyment and appreciation, even when the character does bad things or does not succeed. Further research is called for in order to investigate the implication of this for both positive outcomes, such as greater feelings of empathy or understandings of human frailty, as well as negative outcomes, such as moral disengagement.

The study is relevant to other narrative contexts. The study, therefore, provides some unusual insights on how viewers respond to characters in a landscape of transmedia narratives and has the potential to offer meaningful insights on how gender and character morality contribute to audiences' responses to story characters.

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