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Identification with Favorite Media Personae: A phenomenological conceptualization of audience viewers' reasons for identifying with mediated fictional and real individuals.

### Abstract

A two-part study was conducted to understand how adolescents and adults perceive identifying with a real or fictional media persona. Previous communication research studied this concept either as perceived similarity or the desire to be similar to the media persona. As an exploration to conceptualize the factors of this process, this study consisted of two phases: semi-structured interviews and a quantitative/qualitative survey. Participants were undergraduates at a large Midwestern university, as well as their family and friends. Themes related to both similarity and wishful identification were identified in the interviews and used to construct a survey containing open-ended components. From this content analysis, three types of identification were found: pure similarity, pure wishfulness, and a combination of the two. The conclusion asserts identification should not be consigned as consisting of just one type, and a temporal dimension of identification should be studied to further clarify this complex process and state.

### Purpose of this Study

Despite the best efforts of communication researchers, the predictive ability of media exposure remains weak in explaining a range of possible behavioral and cognitive effects (Oliver, 2002). Numerous theoretical, empirical and methodological explanations could be and have been explored to revamp the field of media effects. Another approach is philosophical. From a phenomenological standpoint, this means taking into account what the media content means to the people who actively choose to consume it; and one route to explore this connection comes with the recognition that people are drawn to those characters and stories that are meaningful to them and can be helpful to them in some way.

Taking into account how a person identifies with a media personality, such as a sports star, movie star, newsperson or some fictional character, may provide one such model for exploring the relationship between the media and possible media effects (Cohen, 2001). The more one identifies with a persona, and the more important this identification is to the identifier, then the more influence the persona may have over the identifier. This potential causality has been examined in numerous persuasion studies (such as Appiah, 2002). Unfortunately, there is confusion in the field as to what exactly is identification with media personae and how to measure it (Cohen, 2001). Additionally, most of the research on the concept deals with children, due to the concern of children imitating characters (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991), and does not address how and/or why adolescents and adults identify with people they see in the media, although research has been conducted on adolescents' and adults' identification and the result of such a parasocial interaction (Appiah, 2001).

There exist two reasons to study adolescents' and adults' rationale for identifying with media personae. First, it is during adolescence that the media can begin to impact the occurrence

and magnitude of risky behaviors (sexuality, drug use, etc., see Arnett, 1992), and these behaviors could be learned from media personae who model such activities in a positive manner. Bandura (2002) theorized that individuals can learn behaviors and cognitions by imitating models, especially if the models are perceived as being positively reinforced in some fashion for their action. Researchers using Bandura's theory have often implied how identification is necessary with the model to produce imitation, but there has been little discussion as to how and why such identification occurs, except for children. Such identification is then often discussed in terms of perceptions of appearance and behaviors (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). However, this view on identification may leave out higher levels of attention that would be seen with older individuals who have the ability to abstract (Arnett, 2004) allowing for cognitive judgments based on factors such as personality traits, values, and struggles with situations.

A second reason is because of the possibility of media personae impacting a person's self concept (McGuire, 1974). According to Erikson (1968), adolescence is a period of identity moratorium, where an individual is actively exploring the roles they can play in the society to which they belong. According to uses and gratifications, one reason people may turn to the media is for the formation or reinforcement of their self-concept (Blumler, 1979). The media provides information about what types of roles are acceptable for that society (Cohen, 2001); identification with media personae might serve to provide information about the characteristics necessary for success in that role. Because understanding roles in society requires more than just physical appearances, identification with media personae would require perceptions based on more abstract aspects. To aid in forming a successful self-concept and identity, identification with such individuals is believed to occur because the individual desires to incorporate the traits (such as personality, attitudes, coping skills, etc.) of the identified into one's own sense of self

(McGuire, 1974; Kamler, 1994). Again, a more nuanced understanding of the factors constituting perceptions of similarity should be addressed as it may show differences to due age.

### Theoretical Conceptualization of Media Personae Identification

The conceptualization of identification within the communication field is bifurcated by different theoretical approaches. Kamler (1994), expounding upon Freud's psychoanalytical definition, rationalized individuals who desire a certain feature identify with someone or something exemplifying that feature. In other words, we identify with something we want to be, such as a popular jock or successful scientist, or with a person who represents where we want to be (Siegel & Siegel, 1954). By identifying with this individual, one can learn what traits are necessary to become that person and internalize these traits to approximate this ideal. Kelman (1961) stated an individual's identification with another is based largely upon perceptions of similarity between the two people by the identifier. These two conceptualizations share the idea that individuals identify based on some belief that the identified is similar to the identifier; however, they differ along a temporal dimension, in that Kamler's definition is based on future possibilities of being similar, whereas Kelman's definition is based upon past or present occasions of being similar.

In von Feilitzen and Linné's (1975) discussion of media personae identification research on children, they termed Kamler's psychoanalytical definition "wishful identification," while labeling Kelman's persuasion definition "similarity identification." According to von Feilitzen and Linné, young children engage in similarity identification almost exclusively, while older children may be likely to engage in wishful identification. The conceit was that both identifications typically do not occur at the same time with the same persona, at least amongst children. Although there was no discussion as to which adolescents and adults would be more

likely to engage in, the hypothesis may be logically extended, in that older individuals would be more likely to engage in wishful identification. This hypothesis could be reasoned with the process of identity formation, as discussed by Erikson and Kamler, and there has been research on how adults are attracted to individuals possessing something they would like to have (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Cohn (1999) differentiated wishful identification into either seeing that person as a role model for future general behavior (inspiration) or as an influence for more immediate specific behavior (imitation). Thus, wishful identification may play a role in both identity formation and more immediate attitudinal and behavioral changes.

Not all conceptualizations of identification and the factors that constitute this process have bifurcated identification. Hoffner and Cantor (1991) theorize that an initial perception of similarity with a persona could promote "a desire to be like them, possibly because certain similarities signal that it is both possible and appropriate for the viewer to become like the character in additional ways." (p. 87). Such a theory posits that a level of similarity identification could coexist with some level of wishful identification. This conceptualization was echoed by Perosanz and Rovira (1998) as they created a scale to measure both similarity and wishful components of identification. Thus there appear to be three separate ways of operationalizing identification. In the relevant research that examined identification with media personae, either the process itself or the end result effects of this process, the three types were employed at separate times, which, according to Cohen's (2001), has lead to the theoretical and empirical confusion in this field of inquiry.

#### Operationalization of Media Pesonae Identification

Numerous studies have been conducted on the effects of identifying with a media persona. Such studies have approached the concept of identification from a pure similarity

approach (Sheehan, 1983; Appiah, 2001; Appiah, 2002), a pure wishful approach (Albert, 1956; Lonial & van Auken, 1986; Hoffner, 1996; Austin, Pinkleton & Fujioka, 2000), or by combining the two approaches (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957). Other studies have been conducted with a slant towards similarity identification, although the measurement of this concept is unclear (Basil, 1996; Brown, Basil & Bocarnea, 2003). However, as Cohen (2001) illustrated, if these effects studies are being done on a concept that is not theoretically clarified, then the results from studies that all claim to be referring to identification using different operationalizations should be taken with a proverbial grain of salt. It is first necessary to understand what identification is before it can be accurately applied in predicting effects.

Several studies have made an attempt to understand the factors that influence whether or not an individual identifies with a media persona. Eyal and Rubin (2003) focused on identification's relationship to perceptions of homophily by investigating how aggressive individuals identify with aggressive media persona. Reeves and Greenberg (1977) found how children differentiate media persona on certain traits, like humor and appearance, was related to how much they wanted to be like the persona. Also exploring wishful identification, Williams, LaRose and Frost (1981) found that good looks and strength were more predictive amongst pre-teens than gender similarity. Perosanz and Rovira (1998) asked young adults questions designed to measure desire to be like another and perceived current similarity, along with other elements such as empathy, fantasy capability and personal attraction. Reeves and Miller (1978) asked children to indicate how similar they felt to specific personae, and also measured how much they want to be like these people, as well as asking them to rate these personae on certain traits. They found the children who said they were more similar to the persona also indicated a higher

agreement with "want to be like" the persona, thus indicating a connection between the two types of identification.

In their goal to understand the process, the researchers above approached the phenomenon with a quantitative methodology that relied on close-end scale items as a measurement tool and forced-choice media personae as a target with which the participants were expected to identify. This procedure is similar across all the research studying the end results of identification, where only Hoffner (1996) allowed the participants to think of their own persona with whom to identify, although Eyal and Rubin (2003) discuss how allowing such freedom may provide stronger results. By restricting the phenomenon to this type of observation, the researchers may be getting *laissez-faire* identification, where the participants may not be strongly identifying with any of the choices, but feel they have to pick one to fit into the constraints of the study. Forcing a participant to choose a particular persona may predict their identification in a particular context but may not help reliably predict the individual's general preference in their identifications. Thus, to understand a person's rationale for identifying, it would be prudent to adopt a more qualitative, phenomenological methodology; allow the individual to select the persona and then discuss how they perceive this identification to be occurring.

Press (1989) conducted a study by interviewing women about their identification with various fictional female television characters. Fraser and Brown (2002) conducted such a study by interviewing Elvis impersonators and fans for their reasons of identifying with the performer. Their results turned up answers that had not yet been considered for any scale, such as musical appreciation (a similarity perception) and the desire to be as successful musically (a wishful perspective). However, because they were interested in the concept of learning from a role model, Fraser and Brown limited the definition of identification to a process of constructing

oneself based upon the perceptions of those they “admire;” thus, the researchers appeared more concerned with the end results than the process. Press had no implicit definition, but by approaching the sample from a feminist and cultural theorist viewpoint, she also did not truly address the mechanisms of this process.

Also, while the qualitative studies addressed older individuals and more complex psychological perceptions of the media personae, the majority of the quantitative studies addressed children and thus less cognitively complex attributional perceptions. Studies have focused on identification as being predicted by gender (Lonial & van Auken, 1986; Hoffner, 1996), physical appearances (Williams et al., 1981), behavior (Reeves & Greenberg, 1977; Reeves & Miller, 1978; Williams et al., 1981; Eyal & Rubin, 2003), and basic personality traits such as humor (Reeves & Greenberg, 1977; Reeves & Greenberg, 1978). However, children, adolescents and adults differ from each other on levels of cognitive development (Arnett, 2004), to the point where it would be expected that older individuals would be more likely to perceive and respond to different attributes in media personae. According to Hoffner and Cantor (1991), younger children attend more to physical appearance than do older individuals when more relevant information is available, while older individuals are more able to interpret emotional and nonverbal information, allowing them to perceive more abstract characteristics of the personae than children can, such as coping strategies and personality traits. Older individuals may be better at decoding this information from the media presentation, and thus more likely to rely on this information when judging the similarity between themselves and the persona.

### Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of identification with media personae from a phenomenological perspective (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002); that is, ask the

identifiers to discuss their identification with a person in the media of their choosing. Also, this study provides an opportunity to explore how older individuals differ from children in their rationale for identifying, along the bifurcation of wishful identification and similarity identification, where perceived similarity is differentiated into physical characteristics, behavioral habits, psychological traits and attitudes, and situational experiences. Three initial hypotheses were generated based on the field of inquiry to date.

H1: Adolescents and adults, if they do indicate perceived similarity between themselves and the persona, will be more likely to describe this similarity as being psychological or situational rather than physical or behavioral.

H2a: As per von Feilitzen and Linné (1975), adolescents and adults will be more likely to describe their identification with media personae as incorporating a desire to be even more like the person (wishful identification) rather than just a perception of currently being like the person (similarity identification).

H2b: As per Hoffner and Cantor (1991), adolescents and adults will describe their identification with media personae as incorporating both similarity identification and wishful identification.

To test these hypotheses, a series of interviews were conducted as the initial foray into understanding how the identifier views the process of identifying with a media persona. These interviews then informed the creation of a quantitative/qualitative survey that could be mass distributed but still retain the sensibilities applied in the interview approach. The purpose of the survey was (1) to further validate the themes determined in the interviews, and (2) to statistically test the generated hypotheses.

## Phase One: Qualitative Interviews

### Method

#### Participants

Seven students at a large Midwestern university were solicited to participate in the first phase of this study, and they received extra credit in their course work for their participation. Four were women and three were men, ages between 19 and 29, with a mean age of 22. All were undergraduates save for one woman, who had just become a graduate student.

#### Procedure

In tape recorded sessions that ranged between 30 and 45 minutes, semi-structured interviews were conducted, using a series of questions as the basic foundation (Flick, 2002). A semi-structured format was used to allow flexibility for asking subsequent, probing questions. All interviews began with the same four questions, two of which were used to gauge perceptions of similarity, "How would you describe yourself to someone who doesn't know you?" and "If you had to describe this person (their selected media persona) to someone who doesn't know him or her, what would you say?" In between these questions, participants were asked to name a persona with whom they identify. They were then asked "What about this person makes you identify with them?" Other trunk questions were used to elicit discussion on hypothesized factors of identification (such as parasocial interaction, as defined by Horton & Wohl, 1956), possible end results (such as imitation) and related concepts (such as role modeling), in an attempt to understand the confusion surrounding these concepts. For the purpose of anonymity, all interviewees will be discussed using the name of the persona they chose.

A thematic analysis was conducted to ascertain the type and frequency of certain issues occurring in the participants' dialogue. These themes, a Wishfulness category and the four

Similarity subcategories, were derived from the von Feilitzen and Linné (1975) definitions as well as psychological research on cognitive development (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Physical Similarity was defined as any discussion of appearance, such as clothes, hair, skin, etc.

Behavioral Similarity was defined as any discussion of external behaviors or mannerisms, such as hobbies, conduct, etc. Psychological Similarity was defined as any discussion of cognitive aspects, such as persona traits or attitudes, likes, values, etc. Situational Similarity was defined as any discussion of events, circumstances or relationships in which the persona is involved; the focus was the individual's interaction with the situation. The Wishfulness category was defined as any discussion of a desire to be more similar, using such keywords as wish, want, hope, try, etc. Other categories were developed inductively during the course of reading the material.

## Results

### Similarity

All seven participants indicated they did perceive the person they identified with to be similar to them in some way. Only one was purely based on behavioral similarity, as the participant identified with any athlete in the media who engaged in the same sporting events. The remaining six perceived the person to be similar based on personality traits (being easy-going, friendly, etc.). Of these six, one also claimed behavior similarity (performing “stunts,”) four claimed physical similarity (appearance, age, gender, etc.), and five claimed situational similarity.

Situational similarity was evidenced by their seeing the person deal with similar life experiences. For example, “Carrie Bradshaw” (Sex in the City) said she began identifying with the character when she saw similarity in how they have dealt with ex-boyfriends. Then there is “Joey Tribbiani” (Friends), who said he related to the character because he was going through

similar struggles. “When he deals with problems or everyday life, in general, I see a lot of myself in him...He still gets by and makes it and that’s sorta been the story of my life.” “Emily Quartermaine” (General Hospital) saw similarity in how the character coped with breast cancer, an issue that impacted her own personal life due to a friend contracting the disease. A participant who identified two individuals, “Carson Daly” and “The Rock,” discussed how similar their career trajectories were to his own. Finally, “Sailor Moon” (Bishojo Senshi Sailor Moon) discussed how they were both dealing with their friends’ perceptions of their abilities:

“...I think some of the thing of her being a double, being this superhero in disguise but also being this like normal...teenager just kind of, it sorta like plays on it that that’s who she is, but people don’t see it and they don’t believe it, and I think that could, that is me in a lot of ways, because only a very, very few people actually know me and understand me and know what I am capable of...”

While it was expected that each situational similarity would be unique to the participant, the important thing is the prevalence of such perceived similarity among this small group, where 5 of 7 indicated situational similarity, and it is reasonable the individual who identified with athletes did so because of the athletic and competitive situations in which they were engaged.

### Wishfulness and Inspirational

All but one of the seven participants indicated that the person served as an inspiration for their own lives, and often this discussion of inspiration was related to some level of desire to be more like the persona. The participants disagreed that they were directly imitating the characters, only that they were inspired by what the characters did, in a way similar to learning how to cope or become better because of their identification. “Emily Quartermaine” appreciated her character’s ability to stand up for herself like the other women of the show, wishing to be more like this other person. “...they say what they want to say, they stand up for what they

believe in, they don't back down. I wish more people – I wish I could be more like that.”

"Emily" did not see this individual as a role model, which could be defined as the member of a group or an individual one aspires to be like (Siegel & Siegel, 1957; Gibson, 2004).

However, others did. "Joey Tribbiani" described seeing the person he identified with as a role model as being a different kind of role model than the one admired as an ideal.

“Could be a role model, as a sign that if this person can do it I can do it. Might be a different way of looking at a role model because, you know if you are seeing this guy as that type of role model, if he can do it I can make it, and if that's your anchor of hope or determination factor...that's totally different from looking at someone and being like, man, I want to be him.”

This definition of role model would be found in four other participants, as well as theme of wanting to be more like the person, which was absent with "Joey." A role model for these individuals is not an ideal to aspire to, but a persona so similar as to be used as a guidepost for one's own direction, with the inspiration coming from "if he can do it, and I'm like him, then I can do it, too".

“Carrie Bradshaw” saw the character as always doing the right thing, and this was important to her at this time because she was about to graduate and enter the working force.

“Sailor Moon” liked how the character accomplished gaining the respect and admiration of those who had thought of her as a “ditzy blonde.” “I don't think I want to be like a superhero...I would rather people see that I am kind of capable, not kind of, I am capable of doing things.”

“Carson Daly” strives to be an actor, but is worried about not having chiseled features. Seeing “Carson” as a “doughy” person, not classically handsome, helped him to not worry about such appearances hurting his career. The participant who identified with athletes discussed how seeing them persevere in tough circumstances not only aided her in her own sports interests, but also served as inspiration for dealing with struggles at school and in having a dual nationality.

### Phase One Summary

Based on the conversations from the interviews, two major themes appeared, supporting the H2b that identification with media personalities can be a function of both perceptions of similarity with the person as well as incorporating elements of a wishful desire to be able to emulate some other aspect of the individual that the identifier does not currently possess. Such a desire was not found in the language to be causing direct imitation, as questions to that factor met with negative responses. Yet the wishful identification seemed to have some definite ties to the concepts of inspiration and role models. The person may be engaging in wishful identification with this individual because the persona is inspiring them to improve upon themselves in some fashion, either by becoming more like the persona or learning from that persona's success or failures (as also discussed by Gibson, 2004). However, these are the words of only seven people, and the interpretation of these words is from only one researcher. To further validate these factors of similarity, wishfulness and inspiration as components of identification, phase two was implemented to gain more data from other cohorts. As the presence of inspiration was not originally hypothesized for this study, an additional hypothesis was applied for the analysis of the survey data:

H3: Inspiration will be more prevalent if a person describes their identification as being a desire to be more similar to the persona (wishful identification).

### Phase Two: Qualitative and Quantitative Survey

#### Method

##### Participants:

Participants were two-hundred seven individuals, one-hundred thirty of whom were students from a large Midwestern university solicited using a commission incentive program; the

students were used to gather information from their friends and family and were given extra credit in their classes based upon what type of surveys they could gather. The sample consisted of 24 Teenagers (13 to 18 years old), 130 Young Adults (19 to 29 years old), and 47 Adults (over 30 years old), and 1 Child (12 years or younger). The mean age was 26, ranging from 11 to 78, with 59% of the sample female and 40% male.

### Questionnaire

The survey was constructed to consist of items to measure perceptions of similarity, wishfulness and inspiration. Each item consisted of a Likert-scale to measure endorsement of the theme in the item (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree). Questions 6 (“I identify with this person because I see similarities between myself and he/she”) and 8 (“I see a lot of myself in this person”) were written for measuring similarity. Questions 7 (“The person I identify with inspires me”) and 10 (“I can learn how to handle things in my life by watching the person”) were for inspiration. Question 9 (“I like to do the things the person does”) was for imitation, although subsequent qualitative analysis revealed a tendency for Behavioral Similarity answers instead. Question 11 (“I would like to be the person I identify with”) was for wishfulness. Each scale-item had attached a statement to elicit a written response to explain why the participant answered as they did to the scale-item. The open-ended aspect of each item was included for exploring the participants’ precise definitions of identification.

### Procedure

The open-ended answers were thematically analyzed, determined by deductive and inductive categorization. The deductive themes were identical in definition to those used in the interviews. Such themes were coded as either present or not within the body of the individual's response, and the number of present sub-themes was totaled to create an overall Similarity

category. From the interviews, an additional category of Inspiration was created. Examples of the themes are below, with individuals given their persona's name.

An example of Physical Similarity was from "Nick Nolte" who said "He looks like nobody took him out of the dryer after it stop cycled. So do I." For Behavioral Similarity, "Bridget Jones" (Bridget Jones Diary), said "While I do enjoy hanging out and spending time with my friends like Bridget does, that's pretty much where our similarities in habits ends." For Psychological Similarity, "Corey Taylor," from the band Slipknot, said "We both pretty much seem to be disgusted by everything." For an example of Situational Similarity, "Jerry" (Soul Food) said "She's independent, divorced, she's an attorney, has a nice house and car. We have almost everything in common." The Wishfulness category resulted in codings such as from "Suzy Kolber" (ESPN), "Suzy Kolber has my dream job right now and I hope to one day get the job that she has." The Inspiration category was defined as any discussion of being motivated to thought and/or action with or without a discussion of active pursuit of that thought or action, using such keywords as inspire, motivate, encourage, etc. For example, "Ashton Kutcher" said "He inspires me to be myself."

Common themes across the sample were derived from the observance that certain descriptor phrases were employed consistently as a response to a certain question, usually to explain why the person disagreed with the statement. One such common theme was labeled Satisfaction with Self, defined as any discussion of being content with oneself with little or no desire to be another person, and is similar to a theme found by Bromnick and Swallow (1999) in their study of adolescents and their heroes. For example, "Lindsey Davenport" said "I would not like to be her, because I am happy with the person that I am now." This theme is conceptualized as a polar opposite of Wishfulness, such that using these two themes as anchors create a

dimension where an individual can have a level of desire that would place them along this axis. This conceptualization will be explored as a new hypothesis in the results (H4), such that when Satisfaction with Self is apparent, then the informant will be less likely to discuss desiring to be like the identified, hence less Wishfulness.

For the intrajudge reliability, calculated because one coder would be coding all 207 responses, Scott's Pi across the themes ranged from 1.00 to 0.82. Interjudge reliability averaged 82% across all theme categories.

## Results

### The Personae

Of the media personae named, 155 were real people and 52 were fictional characters. Over three-fourths were Caucasian (76%), followed by African American (19%). Only one persona of Asian descent was chosen, while 2 were of Hispanic ethnicity. If the respondent was Caucasian, then they were more likely to chose another Caucasian (90%,  $\chi^2=171.259$ ,  $df=25$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). If the individual was of Asian descent, they were more likely to chose a Caucasian persona (65%,  $\chi^2=171.259$ ,  $df=25$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). However, if the individual was of African descent, they were more likely to chose a persona who was also of African descent (77%,  $\chi^2=171.259$ ,  $df=25$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Only one male respondent reported identifying with a female persona; however, 17 women reported identifying with a male persona, although this is still far less than those identifying with another woman (104). Thus there was a positive relationship between the gender of the identifier and the gender of the identifyee ( $r = 0.82$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

### *Themes' Relationships*

All the significant correlations for the theme categories are depicted in Table 1, and will be discussed in relation to specific analyzes conducted. Of the sub-themes for Similarity, coded

for presence or absence, Psychological had the highest average ( $\underline{M} = 0.802$ ,  $\underline{SD} = 0.399$ ), Behavioral had the second highest ( $\underline{M} = 0.628$ ,  $\underline{SD} = 0.487$ ). Physical had the lowest average ( $\underline{M} = 0.188$ ,  $\underline{SD} = 0.392$ ), with Situational slightly higher ( $\underline{M} = 0.246$ ,  $\underline{SD} = 0.432$ ). The average amount of Similarity sub-themes was nearly 2 per respondent ( $\underline{M}=1.855$ ,  $\underline{SD}=0.852$ ). The Inspiration theme occurred in nearly 75% of the sample ( $\underline{M}=0.749$ ,  $\underline{SD}=0.435$ ), whereas the Wishfulness theme occurred only about half of the time ( $\underline{M}=0.541$ ,  $\underline{SD}=0.5$ ). Satisfaction with Self occurred less than 40% of the time ( $\underline{M} = 0.367$ ,  $\underline{SD} = 0.483$ ).

### Similarity

Comparing the means of the sub-themes for Similarity shows a greater frequency of Psychological themes over Physical themes ( $t=15.951$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), Situational themes ( $t=13.327$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and Behavioral themes ( $t=4.319$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). As the age group increased, the frequency of both Psychological and Situational themes tended to increase. For Psychological, the prevalence peaked for the Young Adults (67%,  $\chi^2=10.508$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=0.018$ ) and was lowest for Teenagers (13%). For Situational, the prevalence showed the same pattern, peaking during Young Adults (71%,  $\chi^2=7.449$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=0.059$ ), and was the only sub-theme significantly correlated with age group ( $r = 0.16$ ,  $p=0.021$ ). Thus, H1 was supported; older individuals appear more likely to report perceptions of Psychological and Situational similarities than the other subtypes.

### Wishfulness

To test the competing parts of the second hypothesis, first the age of the participant was studied in relation to the presence of the Wishfulness theme. This relationship showed a negative correlation with the theme ( $r = -0.202$ ,  $p= 0.003$ ). For the age group distinction, Young Adults were almost split between indicating and not indicating Wishfulness, although there was a

slight tendency for indicating Wishfulness (53%,  $\chi^2=9.179$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=0.027$ ). Teenagers, on the other hand, were more likely to indicate the Wishfulness theme in their discussion of identification, with 75% doing so. Adults were less likely to do so, with only 42% indicating some Wishfulness in their response. In a hierarchal regression to predict Wishfulness, age group proved to be significant ( $t=-1.894$ ,  $p=0.018$ ). Thus, there is partial support H2a: Wishfulness was highly prevalent in the Teenager group, and to a lesser extent for the other age groups.

To continue testing the second hypotheses, the relationships between the theme Wishfulness and the type and amount of Similarity themes were analyzed. Wishfulness had no significant correlation with either the sub-theme of Physical or Behavioral Similarities. Wishfulness was negatively correlated with Psychological ( $r = -0.166$ ,  $p=0.017$ ), Situational ( $r = -0.193$ ,  $p=0.005$ ), and the amount of Similarity themes ( $r = -0.19$ ,  $p=0.006$ ). According to analysis of variance tests, when Psychological was not present, Wishfulness was more likely to be present ( $F(1, 205)=5.195$ ,  $p=0.017$ ), and when Situational was not present, Wishfulness is more frequent ( $F(1, 205)=7.962$ ,  $p=0.005$ ). Thus, it appears that Wishfulness is less likely to occur when both Psychological and Situational perceptions are present. This result partially refutes the first part of the second hypothesis, H2a, as adolescents and adults are more likely to identify based on the similarity than wishful component. Thus there is mixed support for H2a, where wishful identification may peak during adolescence but then decrease while abstract similarity comparisons on psychological and situational factors may increase similarity identification.

Yet there is also initial support for the second part of hypothesis two (H2b). While barely significant, and then only at  $\alpha=0.1$ , there are discrepancies as to the frequency of the Wishfulness themes across the different amount of Similarity ( $\chi^2=8.888$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p=0.064$ ). The

presence of Wishfulness occurs more frequently than expected when one Similarity sub-theme is present, and when two sub-themes are present, the occurrence of Wishfulness is essentially split. Additionally, of the total number of respondents ( $n=207$ ), 95 (46%) reported a pure Similarity identification without Wishfulness, 6 (3%) indicated a pure Wishfulness identification, and 106 (51%) indicated that both types of themes were present in their discussion of identifying with their chosen media persona. By a slim majority, there is evidence supporting both hypotheses that older individuals will engage in both types of identification, and that pure similarity is more likely than pure wishfulness in older individuals.

Wishfulness also was negatively correlated with Satisfaction with Self ( $r = -0.224$ ,  $p=0.001$ ), supporting H4. When Wishfulness was present in the responses, Satisfaction with Self occurred less frequently than expected, and this relationship reverses when Wishfulness was not present ( $\chi^2=10.355$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=0.001$ ). This relationship resembles one of the findings of Bromnick and Swallow (1999), and refutes the creation of a dimension for these themes.

### Inspiration

Wishfulness was positively correlated with Inspiration ( $r=0.182$ ,  $p=0.009$ ). When Inspiration was present, there was a greater occurrence of Wishfulness discussion ( $F(1, 205)=7.011$ ,  $p=0.009$ ). The amount and type of Similarity show no significant difference in their relationship with the Inspiration theme; that is, when Inspiration is present, the themes met their expected frequency. Thus, the third hypothesis was supported; Inspiration was more likely if the individual engaged in wishful identification with the persona.

### Role Model

While no part of the survey was intended to directly discuss whether or not the participant felt the persona represented a role model, as was discussed during the interviews, nine

individuals did explicitly call their persona a role model in their open-ended responses. There were fifteen occurrences of the words “role model” in an affirmative context across these respondents, and over 50% of these occurrences were located in the discussion from question 10 (“I can learn how to handle things in my life by watching the person”). All nine individuals had Inspiration themes present, compared to the rate within the overall sample at 75%.

Only one individual in this specific group did not indicate Similarity themes, but did indicate in their response Wishfulness. “I identify with her because I think she is a strong role model for me...I don’t know if I am so similar to her, but I definitely aspire to be.” Only two respondents had no indication of Wishfulness, while one respondent had a split between Wishfulness and Satisfaction with Self, “In a sense I would like to achieve some things like she has. But I love being me.” Of the eight who did indicate some level of Similarity with their persona, they varied on the four subtypes, with Psychological again the most frequent; eight respondents indicated this perception. Thus, 7 out of 9 indicated wishful identification, and 8 out of 9 indicated similarity identification, making it 7 out of 9 who indicated a combination of the two components in their identification with a persona they consider to be a role model.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the concept of identification with media personae as defined by adolescents and adults. The findings about the relationship of themes apparent in the identifiers' rationale helped to shape a more complex picture that has heretofore not been addressed in the research on this phenomenon.

The results of both the interviews and the surveys indicate that the process of identification among adolescents and adults is primarily a process of perceiving similarities

between themselves and the persona. These similarity judgments tend to be more on abstract psychological traits and attitudes (morals, politics, etc.), as well as behaviors and life experiences, than on more basic psychological traits (friendly, humor, etc.) and physical appearance. This finding supports the first hypothesis that as individuals age, they are more likely to base their perceptions of similarity on more abstract and cognitively complex aspects of the other person; yet it would also seem to disprove the von Feilitzen and Linné hypothesis, as similarity themes were more common than the wishfulness theme. However, at the same time, the majority of individuals also indicated a desire to be even more like the persona, with the persona being a source of inspiration for them. Wishful and similarity identification co-existed in the majority of participants. So while von Feilitzen and Linné (1975) would be correct in asserting that wishfulness is more likely among older individuals, as it peaked in this sample amongst the teenagers, Hoffner and Cantor (1991) would be as correct because perceptions of similarity appear to be feeding the desire to be even more similar, perhaps because the persona who is seen as similar is also seen as a source of inspiration, to whom one aspires to be like.

While these findings seemingly create a paradox, this is not necessarily so. von Feilitzen and Linné only applied their bifurcation of identification to children, whereas this sample consisted largely of teenagers, young adults and adults. It is conceivable that teenagers could still be applied to the researchers' hypothesis about older children, whereas the young adult and adult groups should be considered as a different group, as they are theoretically at the end stages of identity formation (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1993). These older individuals may be more likely to use identification for self-enhancement than self-knowledge (Blumler, 1979), and thus are more likely to engage in similarity identification. This tendency amongst the older individuals

would not preclude wishful identification from occurring; only it may be occurring to a lesser extent. Thus, both competing parts of the second hypothesis could be correct.

The finding that inspiration is tied into wishful identification also sheds insight as to how identification with media personae may aid in a teenager's process of identity formation. As adolescents attempt to navigate their place in society, they may turn to individuals who represent the end stage of this process, thus being in a position the adolescent hopes to acquire in the future. Understanding how this individual achieved that position can thus give the adolescent insight into what must be done. Then, if this individual is identified with, at a basic similarity level as well as a basic wishful level (which is already implied by the adolescent's choice of this individual as an exemplar for own self), then this individual can provide the adolescent with inspiration, along the logic of "if that person can do it, and I'm like that person in this a way, then perhaps I can be even more like that person in the future." Whereas adults, having already achieved their major life goals, would not have the need for this inspiration and thus return to similarity identification as a way of interacting with media personae.

### Implications

As discussed by Cohen (2001), there exists a need to standardize the conceptualization of identification with media personae so as to better understand its role in media effects. The results from this study indicate how the process involves different aspects of similarity perceptions for older individuals than those studied with children. Moreover, it may be a disservice to the phenomenon to bifurcate identification into the separate entities of similarity and wishful and then proceed to only study one.

Attempts should be made to theorize the process of identification as involving an interaction between the identifier and identified, wherein the identifier perceives some level of

similarity with the identified, and then this interaction, dependent on mediating or moderating factors (such as self-esteem, relevance, inspiration, etc.), produces within the identifier some level of desire to be even more similar to the identified, which could reside along the dimension where satisfaction with self would be the absence of such wishfulness. This identification process would then result in the effects previously studied, such as persuasion, learning or modeling, internalization of norms or the experience of "being" the persona in the media (the last two being introjection and projection, see Burnstein, Stotland & Zander, 1961). Additionally, although not tested here, as wishful identification can be conceived of as a future potential for similarity, there is the possibility of a temporal similarity dimension as the basic dimension for identification, where a person can identify with someone because of past related similarity, present perceived similarity or future potential similarity.

Until all the factors of this process can be thoroughly clarified, it would be preferable to approach this line of inquiry from a qualitative sensibility. However, for sake of expediency and statistical clarity, constructing a scale along the approach of Perosanz and Rovira (1998) would be a suitable alternative. As not all of this sample indicated both wishful and similarity identification, any scale attempting to use both to understand an individual's identification with a persona should consider weighing each component for how important the individual perceives this aspect to be in how they define identification. If a person only perceives similarity with the persona as their reason for identifying, then they would weigh this component as more important than any desire to be even more like this person, especially if they are already satisfied with who they are, as indicated by this study and Bromnick and Swallow (1999). If they only want to be more like this person but do not see themselves as already being similar, then the wishful component would be more important. If both were important, then both components would be

weighed rather heavily in the identifier's rationale. Such a scale would provide a more complete and accurate picture as the rationale behind an individual's identification with a media personae. Again, it would be preferable to engage in more discussions with individuals to understand all the factors in the process of identification before constructing a scale would be considered.

### Limitations and Future Research

The possibilities for further exploration of the process have already been touched upon in relation to the scale formation. Also, in the limitations and other findings of this study, other problems and questions arose which deserve further explication. First, the participants' discussions were not allowed for the majority (that being the survey sample) to deviate into other possible definitions of identification, as they were relatively limited to the discussion of similarity, wishful, and inspiration components due to the wording of the six scale items used to generate their discussion. This limitation on the range of possible factors was partially offset by allowing the participants' to disagree with the statement and explain their disagreement; however, the survey did not employ pure qualitative methodology (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) as the individuals were not allowed to freely express their layman conceptualizations of the identification process. Such a limitation, as stated before, would be best served by going into more qualitative procedures, such as in-depth interviews. Second, the age group subsample sizes were uneven, preventing more rigorous statistical investigation and comparison. These subsamples should be controlled in future research to illustrate how identification may change due to cognitive complexity (Arnett, 2004) or identity formation stage (Marcia, 1993).

The relationship between the similarity and wishful components, as found in this study, generate questions about how their co-existence affects how a person's interaction with a media persona impacts that persona's ability to influence the individual. Does having some level of

both similarity and wishful components make some individuals more susceptible than others to the persuasion of a celebrity sales pitch? How does this interplay affect how likely an individual is to use that persona when they are developing their sense of self? Does an individual actually actively see such identification as aiding their self-concept? Is the effect more dependent upon the identification components, or on the theoretical moderating variables impacting the wishful component? These are just a few possible questions that could be addressed in future research.

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Table 1  
Correlations of the Relationships Among Key Demographics and Coded Themes

Demographics x Themes	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
Respondent Gender	--	--	0.14**	--	0.25*
Media Persona Gender	--	--	0.16**	--	0.28*
Age Group	0.16**	--	--	-0.20*	--
Media Persona Type	0.27*	--	-0.21*	--	--
1. Psychological Similarity	--	--	--	-0.17**	--
2. Situational Similarity	--	--	--	-0.19*	--
3. Similarity	--	--	--	-0.19*	--
4. Inspiration	--	--	--	0.18*	--
5. Wishfulness	--	--	0.18*	--	-0.22*
6. Satisfaction with Self	--	--	--	--	-0.22*

Notes: \*\*  $\alpha = 0.05$       \*  $\alpha = 0.01$