

Responses to Television Characters during Emerging Adulthood: Examining the
Influence of Identity Exploration on Contact and Involvement with Diverse Characters

by

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A Dissertation

In

Media and Communication

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of Texas Tech University in
Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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December, 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was supported by the Clint Formby and Wendell Mayes, Jr. Student Research Endowment in the College of Media & Communication, Texas Tech University as well as the Graduate Student Research Funding Award in the College of Media & Communication, Texas Tech University.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	vi
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. EMERGING ADULTHOOD AND IDENTITY EXPLORATION.....	5
Identity Formation in Adolescence.....	5
Continued Identity Exploration in Emerging Adulthood.....	7
III. MEDIATED CONTACT AND CHARACTER INVOLVEMENT.....	11
Mediated Contact Hypothesis.....	12
Theoretical Overview of Mediated Contact.....	13
Application of Mediated Contact.....	17
IV. MEDIA USE AND IDENTITY EXPLORATION.....	20
Theoretical Framework.....	20
The Current Project.....	22
V. STUDY I.....	25
Hypotheses.....	26
Method.....	27

Respondents	27
Procedure	27
Measures	28
Analytic Technique	30
Results.....	31
Discussion.....	38
VI. STUDY II	41
Research Questions.....	42
Method	42
Themes.....	44
Love, Career, and TV Characters	44
Ideology and TV Characters	46
Ideology Disconnection	47
Discussion.....	49
VII. CONCLUSION	52
Concluding Remarks.....	59
REFERENCES	61
APPENDICES	
A. SCREENER INFORMATION SHEET.....	65

B. INTERVIEW SCREENER	66
C. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL.....	69
D. SURVEY INFORMATION SHEET	71
E. SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE.....	72

ABSTRACT

Involvement with media characters provide opportunities to connect with those from different social groups. Contact with characters of social out-groups has been shown to reduce prejudice toward said groups. However, media consumers often do not take the opportunity to connect with these characters, preferring interactions with those more similar to themselves. That said, developmental processes, such as identity exploration, have the potential to influence media uses and effects. Emerging adults (ages 18-25) continue to explore their identities and are less certain of their own identities and values. It is during identity exploration that emerging adults may be more inclined to interact with those of different racial and ethnic backgrounds and social values. In this manuscript, two studies examine the influence of identity formation on involvement (i.e., parasocial relationships and identification) with television characters. The first is a qualitative study which will provide insight into media viewers' engagement with identity exploration, connections with media characters, and how these characters influence their perceptions of self and their values. The second study is a quantitative survey which will examine the influence of identity exploration on the diversity of characters the media viewers interact with, and the intensity of these interactions. Findings of this study suggest that while identity exploration does influence the process of mediated contact, this developmental process' ability to reduce in-group favoritism directly is limited. Furthermore, in the case of racial diversity identity exploration does not moderate the relationship between contact with diverse characters and involvement with these characters. The same is true for the relationship between ideological difference

with characters and identification with characters. However, identity exploration does influence the relationship between ideological difference with characters and PSR with characters. Unfortunately, this finding suggests that those more engaged in identity formation are more likely to find less attachment towards characters that are ideologically diverse. Interviews revealed that while emerging adults rely on media characters in constructing their love and career identities, they rely little on characters in constructing their ideology. Instead, emerging adults look to interpersonal socializers, such as family and church. Additionally, emerging adults struggle to connect with media characters that have a different ideology than their own, if they are deeply engaged in the narrative. However, for emerging adults that lack this engagement in the narrative, they are able to remain attached to the characters despite their ideological differences. All this suggests identity exploration can be an important mechanism in understanding mediated contact, especially during emerging adulthood. However, rather than bridging the gap with diverse media characters, identity exploration may limit engagement with diverse characters for those individuals deeply immersed in the narrative.

LIST OF TABLES

5.1	Pearson correlation matrix for key variables	32
5.2	Results for logistic regression analysis for identity exploration on contact with racially diverse characters	33
5.3	Results for regression analysis for identity exploration on contact with ideologically diverse characters	34
5.4	Results for moderation analysis for racial diversity and identity exploration on involvement with characters	35
5.5	Results for moderation analysis for ideological difference and identity exploration on involvement with characters	36
5.6	Conditional effect of ideological differences with character on parasocial relationship at values of identity exploration.....	38

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Americans love television programming and the fascinating characters that inhabit this programming. Entertainment television programming and media characters are designed in such a way to elicit an intense and engaging experience (Skegg & Wood, 2012). However, while media characters are often thought of as a source for joy, entertainment and connection, these characters are important in that they have the ability to influence our perceptions of people in different social groups. While much research has focused on the negative influences of media characters, there is optimism surrounding characters' ability to positively influence attitudes towards groups (see Park, 2012 for an overview). Unfortunately, media consumers are more likely to engage with characters that they consider similar to themselves (Chung & Slater, 2013). However, there may be developmental susceptibilities that influence this selectivity; one such process being identity exploration. During identity exploration, individuals may be less certain of themselves, which in-turn may reduce in-group favoritism. This study will examine the influence of identity exploration on the connections television viewers make with characters different from themselves and how they connect to these characters.

Identity is the overall self-concept a person has about themselves and must be constructed during a process of identity exploration (Erikson, 1968). While identity exploration was originally thought to occur primarily during adolescence, contemporary scholars argue that technological and cultural shifts in the modern world have moved identity exploration into one's twenties in a developmental stage called emerging

adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adults develop their identity in three main domains: work, love, and worldview (Arnett, 2014). Exploration in these identity domains occurs through exploration and interactions with others (Arnett, 2000). While interpersonal interactions with peers, teachers, and other individuals of different backgrounds and values undoubtedly contribute to identity exploration, mediated interactions with television characters have been shown to contribute to identity formation (see Hoffner, 2008). Furthermore, interactions with those of different social backgrounds and ideologies may be particularly impactful during identity exploration because individuals are less certain of their own identities and values. Because of this uncertainty, individuals may express less in-group favoritism than an individual that is more certain of his or her identity. These interactions are important in that they are often lauded for mitigating prejudice.

Conflict between social groups has been thought to be caused by prejudice, or negative evaluations, on the part of majority group members towards minority group members (Fujioka, 1999). Early scholars believed prejudice could be reduced through interactions, or contact, between individuals of different social groups (William, 1947). Explaining how contact can reduce prejudice, the contact hypothesis asserts that only under certain conditions does contact become effective (Allport, 1954). An extension of this literature, the mediated contact hypothesis suggests that not only can interpersonal interactions between those of different social groups reduce prejudice, but interactions with mediated characters can reduce prejudice as well (Park, 2012). However, one concern surrounding the contact and mediated contact hypothesis is the notion that it is

unlikely for individuals to actively choose to interact with those of different backgrounds and values (Chung & Slater, 2013). It is here that identity exploration may positively impact mediated contact.

Emerging adults undergoing identity exploration, particularly within the domain of ideology, may be more likely to interact with characters of different racial backgrounds and ideologies. That is, emerging adults uncertain of their own ideology might be more open to connection with characters of differing ideology. Furthermore, these interactions may be stronger during identity exploration which could result in the reduction of prejudices towards these characters. This study seeks to explore these propositions, explaining our understanding of the influence of development on contact with diverse characters. Additionally, this will examine if contact with diverse characters and involvement with these characters is contingent on identity exploration. Furthermore, this study also seeks to expand the concept of contact to not only include different social groups, but to examine differences in ideology as well.

To examine these propositions, two studies are conducted. In the first study, emerging adults participate in an online survey examining their engagement in identity exploration, selecting a television character, reporting their perceptions of the racial background and ideology of this character, their involvement with this character (i.e., parasocial relationships and identification), and finally provide key demographic information on their own racial background and ideology. It is expected that identity exploration should be positively related to contact with racially and ideologically diverse characters. Furthermore, it is predicted that there should be an interaction between

identity exploration and contact with racially and ideologically diverse characters on parasocial relationships and identification with characters. When identity exploration is high, parasocial relationships and identification with diverse characters will be stronger than when identity exploration is low. In the second study, emerging adults are interviewed to examine their engagement in identity exploration in three domains (i.e., love, work, and ideology), and how the media character they find “meaningful” influences these domains. Additionally, emerging adults will be questioned about how they respond to characters of differing ideologies.

CHAPTER II

EMERGING ADULTHOOD AND IDENTITY EXPLORATION

Identity formation is an important developmental task that occurs during adolescence and young adulthood (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013). Identity can be examined as either a singular construct or as existing within various domains (Fadjukoff, Pulkkinen, & Kokko, 2016). The formation of this identity occurs through the exploration of the self and the potential identities that one can have. In examining identity exploration, this study will focus on two development theories of identity formation: Erikson's (1968) psychosocial stages theory and the theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2014).

Identity Formation in Adolescence

Erikson (1968) suggested that identity formation was one of the main psychosocial tasks of adolescence. As one of many developmental crises throughout the lifespan, adolescents feel compelled to engage in identity exploration due to a psychosocial crisis; identity vs. role confusion. During this crisis, adolescents struggle to find their place in their growing social world. This growth is due to the cognitive development that occurs in early adolescence. Children younger than 12 have not developed the capacity for formal operations, or the ability to understand events abstractly (see Schwartz, et al., 2013). After children develop this cognitive capacity, it allows for them to consider all the possible opportunities available to them, known as identity alternatives. *Identity alternatives* exist when there are multiple options available within certain social contexts or domains, such as political preference, religious

orientation, gender/sexuality, ethnicity, occupation, etc (Schwartz, et al., 2013). For example, a young male may question the different sexualities with which he could identify; straight, bisexual, gay. It is through identity exploration and eventually selecting an identity that one resolves this psychosocial crisis (Erikson, 1968).

Marcia (1966) is largely credited with operationalizing this identity exploration process theorized by Erikson. Marcia first proposed that the defining characteristics of the identity formation process are exploration and commitment. *Exploration* is when individuals sort through and try out different potential identity alternatives. Conversely, *commitment* is when an individual selects among the different alternatives and adheres to one (Marcia, 1966).

Marcia (1966) divided this process into four different identity statuses: diffusion, moratorium, foreclosure, and achievement. *Diffusion* is the lack of engagement in the identity exploration process. Conversely, *moratorium* is the active engagement in identity exploration. Both of these statuses are forms of exploration in that they focus on engagement or disengagement in exploring identity alternatives. During *foreclosure*, an individual selects an identity without much exploration of alternatives whereas during *achievement* an individual selects an identity after extensive exploration of identity alternatives (Marcia, 1966). Both of these statuses are forms of commitment. Identity achievement is the most sophisticated of the four identity statuses, whereas identity diffusion is the least sophisticated (Waterman, 1999).

Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1966) are some of the first scholars to examine identity exploration. As aforementioned, these scholars posited that identity formation is

the primary task of adolescence. This may very well have been true when this seminal work was being written, with many American adolescents marrying and entering the workforce shortly after high school (see Schwartz, et. al, 2013). However, due to cultural and technological changes in countries like the United States, contemporary scholars suggest that identity formation continues well into young adulthood in a developmental stage coined *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2000).

Continued Identity Exploration in Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood describes a developmental stage in which identity exploration continues beyond adolescence (Arnett, 2000). Described another way, emerging adulthood is a period of “in-between-ness” in which an individual is no longer an adolescent but has not yet acquired the commitments of adulthood (Schwartz, et al., 2013). Arnett (2014) argues that four cultural and technological revolutions have allowed for this in-between-ness to occur: the technology revolution, the sexual revolution, the women’s movement, and the youth movement. The technological revolution is the shift in jobs from the manufacturing sector to the service sector caused by automation of many factory jobs. Service jobs require more training and education, leading many young adults to continue their education after secondary school. The sexual revolution started with the widespread dissemination of the birth control pill, which separated sex from pregnancy and marriage. The women’s movement fought for equality between the sexes in areas such as education, occupation, and household/relational roles. Finally, the youth movement advocated for the freedom to explore one’s personal interests, rather than immediately starting a family and a career. Each of the revolutions allowed for

individuals in their late teen and twenties to have the opportunity to continue exploring their identity free of “adult” commitments, such as a single career or a marriage and family (Arnett, 2014). In this period of “in-between,” emerging adults explore their identity in three main domains; work/occupation, love/romance, and ideology. During emerging adulthood, for many there is a lack of stability in these domains and exploration occurs through various experiences in each of these domains.

Identity exploration into work identity begins in adolescence (Arnett, 2014).

While many adolescents have some sort of work experiences, their motivation is usually acquiring money to spend on weekend activities. It is during emerging adulthood that exploration into work identity becomes more serious and focused. This is in part due to the fact that young adults are no longer expected to start a family in their late teen and early twenties. Today, young adults are delaying developing families into their late twenties or early thirties and thus do not have the financial commit of raising a family. Thus, emerging adults are interested in finding a job that not only meets their financial needs, but also fits with their values and is work that they find satisfying. Work identity is usually explored through participation in various short-term jobs, internships, and shadowing experiences. These jobs are not typically held long and offer emerging adults the opportunity to see if these careers “fit” with their sense of self. After exploring different career options, emerging adults will commit to one that they believe fits with their identity (Arnett, 2014).

As with work identity, love and romance is explored by adolescents but is continued on into emerging adulthood. Many emerging adults are postponing marriage

into their late twenties and thirties (Arnett, 2014). Additionally, due to the sexual revolution with the dissemination of the birth control pill and the women's movement changing social norms around women's sexuality, emerging adults are more sexually and romantically adventurous than ever before (Arnett, 2014). Furthermore, norms around marriage have changed as well, with later marriage being more acceptable than before (Regnerus & Uecker, 2011). Instead, many emerging adults opt to stay single or cohabitate throughout their twenties (Dykstra & Poortman, 2010). This allows for emerging adults to explore their romantic identity for much longer and with more partners than they would have in the past. Emerging adults use these experiences to examine what they are looking for sexually and romantically with a partner. This allows for emerging adults to explore the kinds of relationships they wish to have long term (Arnett, 2014).

The final domain explored during emerging adulthood is ideology, or worldview. Ideology is comprised of two main factors: religious beliefs and personal values. Again, the development of one's worldview begins early on during childhood and throughout adolescence. However, development of one's ideology continues into emerging adulthood for many individuals. Exploration of religious or spiritual questions is "invariably" part of the formation of their ideological identity (Arnett, 2014). That said, during emerging adulthood, attendance of religious services drops for many Americans (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007). Additionally, many emerging adults do not readily engage in questions of morality during this period (Smith, Christofferson, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011). However, emerging adults are usually able to articulate their religious

beliefs. For these individuals, it seems that their religious beliefs are derived primarily from their parents (Arnett, 2014). In addition to religious beliefs, values are an important part of one's ideology. Values are set of moral principles that provide a guide to answering important life decisions. While values can be derived from one's religious beliefs, they can also be cultural or personal in nature (Arnett, 2014). Emerging adults may seek experiences that are more diverse than during their childhood and adolescence. This is due to the lack of parental oversight during this period of life (Arnett, 2014). Emerging adults will explore their beliefs and values, in some cases reinforcing and in other cases changes their beliefs/values. This exploration occurs through civic and political activism, interacting with those of different belief systems, and educational opportunities (see Schwartz, et. al, 2013).

On the whole, in both psychosocial and emerging adulthood theory, exploration of different identity alternatives in various domains is important. Thus, far many of these theories have focused on interpersonal or social interactions that occur in person. However, the media and mediated interactions may also be used in exploring different identity alternatives.

CHAPTER III

MEDIATED CONTACT AND CHARACTER INVOLVEMENT

The contact hypothesis posits that contact, or interactions between individuals of different social groups, can reduce prejudice under certain conditions (Allport, 1954). Prejudice is a negative attitude experienced towards individuals based on their membership in a social group, about which the majority group member has stereotyped beliefs (Allport, 1954; Igartua & Frutos, 2017). The contact hypothesis suggests, however, that mere contact is not enough to reduce prejudice and, in fact, has the potential to increase prejudice instead (Allport, 1954). The contact hypothesis asserts that four conditions that must be met in order for contact between individuals to reduce prejudice (Allport, 1954).

The first condition is equal status during the contact situation. Members of both groups must perceive that they share equal status with members of the other social group. The second condition that must be achieved during contact is the sharing of common goals. During contact, members of both groups must share the same goals or tasks to complete. The third condition is intergroup cooperation. Members of the different groups should be required to work with one another, rather than engage in some form of competition. The last condition for contact to have a positive impact on attitudes is having the support of authorities, law, or customs. The general social atmosphere during the contact situation must be supportive of the contact for there to be a positive impact.

Subsequent research since following Allport (1954) has generally been supportive of his hypothesis (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005). With it, new potential moderators of contact

on prejudice have been examined. For example, the typicality of an out-group member, or the degree to which an individual is representative of his/her social group, has been explored as an important moderator.

Mediated Contact Hypothesis

The mediated contact hypothesis is an extension of the contact hypothesis, in which the influence of media consumption on the reduction of prejudice is examined. Mediated contact is based on different mechanisms: vicarious contact, parasocial contact and identification (Park, 2012).

All four of the contact hypothesis' conditions can be applied to the mediated contact situation; however, the application will depend on the type of mediated contact that occurs (Park, 2012). For example, one form of mediated contact is a more vicarious form of contact in which a media viewer has a parasocial interaction with an in-group character who is engaging in an interaction with an out-group character (Park, 2012). During this type of mediated contact, all four conditions of contact are applicable as potential moderators of mediated contact on prejudice.

However, the contact hypothesis conditions for intergroup contact may not apply to certain forms of mediated contact. For example, during a more direct type of mediated contact, such as a parasocial interaction between a media viewer and a character, a researcher might not expect "shared goals" to function as a moderator for contact and prejudice (Park, 2012). This is because while the viewer may experience a parasocial interaction with a character, this does not mean they necessarily have adopted the character's goals as their own. Similarly, during identification with a character, a media

viewer might experience shared goals with a character, however, the condition of intergroup cooperation may not be meaningful. This is because during identification the media viewer loses their sense of self, and with it their in-group status. The viewer adopts the perspective and goals of the character and there is no longer an in-group/out-group interaction occurring. Thus, in this type of mediated contact, considering cooperation vs. competition is no longer useful.

Mediated contact and interpersonal contact can be very similar. In both situations, individuals can experience an interaction with a member of an in-group. However, the mediated situation usually leads to some difference in how the process of contact works. This is because in the intergroup contact situation there is direct contact with a member of an out-group. Whereas with mediated contact, this contact is only perceived and under a mediated situation, allowing for a more limited experience of contact between viewer and character.

Theoretical Overview of Mediated Contact

There are three main theoretical explanations for mediated contact: vicarious contact, parasocial contact with a character, and identification with character.

The first explanation for how mediated contact can affect outgroup attitudes is through vicarious contact. This perspective applies the concept of “vicarious observation” from social cognitive theory to intergroup contact (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). This perspective explains what occurs when a media viewer observes an interaction between a character that is part of the viewers in-group and another character, who is an out-group member. During this viewing situation, viewers expected to emulate the emotional

responses that the in-group characters have towards the out-group characters (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). So, if the in-group character has a positive interaction with the out-group character and the in-group character appears to experience positive emotions, then the viewer should experience these positive emotions as well, which in turn is thought to reduce prejudice towards the out-group. From this perspective, the pseudo-contact occurs indirectly between two characters, rather than directly between viewer and character.

The second explanation for how mediated contact can affect out-group attitudes is through parasocial contact. Parasocial contact is an application of the concept of parasocial interaction. *Parasocial interactions* are natural responses media viewers have toward media personae and characters in which they process messages from a mediated individual in the same ways they would process messages during an ortho-social interpersonal interaction. Parasocial and orthosocial interactions are thought to be processed similarly because human brains have not evolved to process social messages from non-humans differently than they do for humans (Reeves & Nass, 1996). Due to this, Schiappa and colleagues (2005, 2006) suggest that when media viewers have a parasocial interaction with a positively portrayed character, there will be a reduction in prejudice towards that character's group. From this perspective, the pseudo-contact occurs directly between the media viewer and character.

An important aspect of this form of contact is the way in which the character is portrayed. Positive spectatorship, when a character is portrayed in a positive way, is thought to lead to a reduction in prejudice towards the out-group (Park, 2012).

Conversely, negative spectatorship, when a character is portrayed in a negative light, is

thought to lead to hostile emotions toward the character and his/her social group – perpetuating prejudice (Park, 2012). However, in addition to spectatorship, viewers can engage in parasocial interactions with the character that are positive or negative in nature. Parasocial interactions are thought to be more involved than simple spectatorship, and subsequently are thought to increase the effectiveness of the mediated contact's ability to reduce prejudice (Park, 2012). It is worth noting though, that the reverse is true as well, with negative parasocial interactions increasing prejudice more so than negative spectatorship.

The third and final explanation for how mediated contact can affect out-group attitudes is through identification. *Identification* is a process that occurs when a media consumer becomes absorbed into a narrative – losing their sense of actual time and place. The consumer engages in perspective taking from a character's point of view and adopting the goals and motivations of the character. This results in the media viewer losing their sense of self (Cohen, 2001; Oatley, 1994). This perspective draws from social identity theory to examine how media viewers perceive a social group through the perspective of an out-group member.

Social identity theory suggests that people wish to achieve or maintain a positive social identity and are thus motivated to improve/maintain their self-esteem, gain/protect group resources, or maintain group dominance (Chung & Slater, 2013). One mechanism that accomplishes this is in-group favoritism, in which individuals differentiate others into in-groups and out-groups and show more favorable evaluations of in-group members than out-group members. However, through identification a media viewer loses his or her

sense of self and with it their own social identity. Instead, the viewer adopts the social identity of the out-group character through perspective taking. This is thought to allow media viewers to re-evaluate their perceptions and evaluations of the out-group from a different perspective than their own (Chung & Slater, 2013). Rather than engaging the out-group character from their own social identity during which in-group favoritism may come into play, the viewer instead engages the out-group character from the character's perspective, losing their sense of self and with it the in-group favoritism. This would allow for identification with an out-group character to reduce prejudice towards that character's group. However, as noted before, it is important to recognize that identification with an out-group character may not be completely positive. Identification with a stereotyped character may reduce prejudice towards an out-group, while also reinforcing negative stereotypes about that group (McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2016). Furthermore, it is important to note that identification is more likely to occur with more intensity with positive characters, such as those in one's in-group, than with negative characters, such as those of one's out-group (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010).

Park (2012) suggests that identification can also allow for a media viewer to instead identify with an in-group character who is interacting with an out-group character. Again, during identification a media viewer takes the perspective of the character (Cohen, 2001). If the character with whom a viewer is identifying has a positive interaction with an out-group member, then they will experience the character's experience as their own. In turn, through these perspective-taking experiences,

identification can allow for mediated contact with an out-group character to reduce prejudice towards that character's group.

Finally, it is worth noting that in each of these explanations how a character is portrayed as well as the interactions between characters is important in determining whether the mediated contact will increase, decrease, or maintain prejudice. In particular, in order for prejudice to be reduced, a character must be portrayed positively and interactions between in-group and out-group characters must be positive as well. Negative portrayals of characters or interactions between characters may lead to the reinforcement or worsening of prejudice towards out-group characters.

Application of Mediated Contact

Previous research has shown that mediated intergroup contact has the potential to have a positive impact on attitudes towards outgroup members (see Park, 2012).

Mediated contact has been applied in numerous research contexts, including but not limited to, gay men (Schiappa, et al., 2005, 2006; McLaughlin & Rodriguez, 2016; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007), recovering drug addicts (Chung & Slater, 2013), African-Americans (Dunn & McLaughlin, 2019; Ramasubramanian, 2013), immigrants (Igartua & Frutos, 2017) and Latinas (McLaughlin, Rodriguez, Dunn, & Martinez, 2018). Each of these studies demonstrate that mediated contact, albeit through different processes, has the ability to reduce prejudice towards outgroup members. Another potential positive effect of mediated contact is its ability to change the underlying stereotyped beliefs leading to prejudice (Park, 2012). However, the influence of mediated contact on stereotyped beliefs has received less attention than the former.

Granted, despite the optimism of the research in mediated contact, there are potential negative outcomes of contact as well. While mediated contact may reduce prejudice towards a group, it also concurrently reinforces negative stereotypes about social groups (McLaughlin, et al., 2018). Furthermore, there is a rich literature arguing that stereotyped characters and personae in the media may lead to the formation and reinforcement of negative stereotypes of stigmatized groups leading to the reinforcement of prejudice towards these groups (see Park, 2012). Additionally, contact with counter-stereotyped lead characters and stereotyped supporting characters leads to mixed outcomes (Dunn & McLaughlin, 2019).

As noted before, one limitation of the mediated contact hypothesis is that people are more likely to interact with characters that are similar to themselves (Chung & Slater, 2013) limiting the effectiveness of contact. However, identity exploration during emerging adulthood may influence the characters with whom emerging adults interact, since emerging adults interact with a variety of individuals as they explore the identity alternatives available to them. This may be particularly true as emerging adults explore their ideological identity.

While ideological identity can lead to polarization and distance between groups, during identity exploration in emerging adulthood this identity may be more tenuous. Without a firm grasp of their values and worldview, emerging adults may be more amenable to making contact with individuals from different ideologies, both in person and on the screen. While the majority of contact and mediated contact literature has focused on the influence of contact on attitudes towards social groups, examining the

influence of contact on those with different ideologies may influence the formation of one's ideological identity. That is, by interacting with a variety of characters of different values one may adopt values such as tolerance and openness. Then as one's attitudes are usually in line with one's values, these underlying values could influence attitudes towards not just one social group but potentially with many different social groups.

Again, the challenge to this process is that individuals usually prefer to interact with those similar to themselves. Therefore, the incorporation of the developmental processes of identity exploration are important to the study of mediated contact with out-groups and those of different ideologies.

CHAPTER IV

MEDIA USE AND IDENTITY EXPLORATION

Developmental processes have the ability to influence media usage and its subsequent effects, which can in turn influence development (Valkenburg & Peters, 2013). One such case is the transactional relationship between media usage and identity formation. Media, in general, can be used in identity formation processes (Arnett, 1995). Involvement with media characters has also been linked to the development of various identities, such as gender and sexual identity (see Hoffner, 2008). This research has primarily focused on identity formation in late childhood and adolescence. However, media usage and involvement with characters may be unique during emerging adulthood.

Mediated intergroup contact may be particularly influential during the process of identity exploration. Mediated contact may function differently during identity exploration than it would after one has solidified his or her identity. Since emerging adults might be less certain of themselves, they may be more willing to interact with or contact characters that are different than themselves. This would allow for emerging adults to make contact with characters that might not otherwise be considered positive, or part of one's in-group. One communication framework that supports this proposition is the differential susceptibility to media effects model (DSMM; Valkenburg & Peters, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the differential susceptibilities to media effects model (DSMM; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). This model explains the

conditions that influence media effects. There are four features to the model: differential susceptibilities, media use, response states, and media effects. In line with similar media effects theories, media use is the consumption of media in various forms (e.g., watching television, playing video games). Media effects are long and short-term conscious and unconscious changes within a person (e.g., physiological, affective, behavior, cognitive, etc.).

Differential susceptibilities are conditional variables that both predict media use and moderate the relationship between media use and response states. There are three types of differential susceptibilities which influence media use: dispositional, developmental, and social. Dispositional susceptibilities are individual characteristics of the media users that are more transient (e.g., mood) or enduring (e.g., gender). Developmental susceptibilities are developmental processes, either cognitive, social, or emotional in nature, that influence media use and responsiveness (e.g., identity exploration). Lastly, social susceptibilities are micro (e.g. friends, family), meso (e.g., institutional norms), and macro (e.g., cultural norms) factors. These differential susceptibilities influence the media that television viewers select as well as moderate the relationship between media use and response states.

According to the DSMM, response states are cognitive, emotional, or excitative feedback to media stimuli. Cognitive response states are the amount of attention and investment media viewers have devoted to comprehending the media stimuli. Emotional response states are positive or negative affective reactions to media stimuli. Finally, excitative response states are physiological arousal to media content.

The DSMM proposes that differential susceptibilities both predict media use and moderate the relationship between media use and response states; response states mediate the relationship between media use and media effects; and media effects are transactional influencing the differential susceptibilities, media use, and response states.

The Current Project

Using this framework, one could examine the influence of identity exploration on the mediated contact hypothesis. Focusing on the developmental susceptibility, identity exploration may serve an important socioemotional developmental process. Mediated contact through parasocial relationships and identification are cognitive-emotional response states resulting from media use and may be influenced by identity exploration. Parasocial relationships are socio-emotional bonds media consumers develop with media characters (Slater, Ewoldsen, & Woods, 2017), whereas identification is absorption into the narrative and perspective taking with the media character (Cohen, 2001). Of course, these response states are shown to influence attitudes towards out-groups by reducing prejudice towards out-group members. Additionally, this change in attitude may be influential in the identity exploration process. As attitudes towards social out-groups change, emerging adults may be more likely to adopt values, such as tolerance and openness, in their ideological identity.

Identity exploration in the identity domain of ideology might be especially impactful to mediated contact. The ideology domain consists of exploration in the areas of moral, social, and political beliefs. Political identity may be fostered interpersonally through civic and political engagement (see Schwartz, et. al, 2013). Furthermore, the

media has been shown to be influential in the formation of political identity (Arnett, 1995). For example, there is a positive relationship between using political news media, via television news or newspaper, and an adolescent's political knowledge and participation (Garramone & Atkin, 1986). In examining contact with media characters as a form of media use, it is possible that contact with media characters of different racial and ideological backgrounds may be influenced by identity exploration.

This study seeks to examine the relationship between identity exploration in emerging adulthood and mediated contact with television characters. First, in line with much of the mediated contact literature, this study will examine the influence of identity exploration on mediated contact with those of different social backgrounds. Emerging adults may be more likely to interact with characters of different ethnic or racial backgrounds, if they are uncertain of their own identity as a whole.

H1: Identity exploration will increase contact with television characters of (a) racial and (b) ideological out-groups.

Mere exposure to or contact with a character is not enough to change perceptions of social out-groups (Allport, 1954). It is through parasocial relationships or identifying with characters that perceptions of social groups are changed. Since emerging adults may have less in-group favoritism, the intensity of these interactions should be higher.

H2: Identity exploration will increase the intensity of (a) parasocial relationships and (b) identification with television characters of different social groups.

Expanding the mediated contact literature, the influence of identity exploration on contact with characters not of different particular social groups, but characters of

different ideologies, beliefs and values will be examined. An emerging adult who is uncertain of their own ideology may be more likely to make contact with characters of various ideologies. For example, an individual who is uncertain of their identity may be more likely to make contact with both politically conservative or liberal characters than someone who is certain of their political values.

H3: Identity exploration increases the intensity of (a) parasocial relationships and (b) identification with characters with different ideologies.

This study also seeks to explore the ways in which emerging adulthood might influence involvement with media characters. Identity exploration is thought to occur in these domains during emerging adulthood: love, occupation, and ideology (Arnett, 2014). This study will examine the relationship between exploration of these domains and contact with media characters.

RQ1: Is there a connection between exploration in the three domains of emerging adulthood and exposure to media characters?

This study will also seek to explore how emerging adults respond to media characters of differing values more generally. Media viewers, in general, may not relate or identify with characters that did not align with their ideological views. However, it is possible that emerging adults are more open to connections with characters of differing views.

RQ2: How do emerging adults respond to characters of differing values?

CHAPTER V

STUDY I

Mediated contact with characters has been shown to mitigate tension with out-groups (see Park, 2012). One potential nature antecedent to this media effect is the process of psychosocial development. The theoretical framework for this study will be the DSMM (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), this study examines the influence of human development and media use on response states to media characters.

Human development will be examined in the form of identity exploration that occurs during the process of emerging adulthood. Identity exploration is the engagement in the process of considering and examining potential identity alternatives (Schwartz, et al., 2013). Media can be used in the identity exploration process (Arnett, 1995) and this study will focus on the use of media characters in this process.

Media use will be explored in the form of contact with media characters. Contact with media characters will be examined in two forms. The first form of contact to be examined is related to characters that are racially diverse from the viewer. Racial diversity is examined as a media character being in a racial category outside of the emerging adults' perceptions of their own racial categories. This study will examine if engagement in identity exploration increases the likelihood that one engages with characters outside of one's own racial category. The second form of contact to be examined is engagement with characters of differing ideologies. Ideology will be examined as both political and religious positions ranging from liberal to conservative. Thus, ideological difference is the discrepancy between an emerging adult's current

ideology and their perception of a media character's ideology. Contact with racially and ideologically diverse characters is expected to lead to response states within the viewer.

The response states examined in this study are parasocial relationships and identification to characters. A parasocial relationship (PSR) is the enduring attachment experienced towards a media character. Identification is a cognitive and motivational process in which media viewers take on the perspective and goals of a media character while being absorbed into the narrative and losing one's sense of self. Both constructs have been examined as mechanisms leading to reduced prejudice towards an out-group (see Park, 2012). This study also seeks to examine if the relationships between PSR and identification with media characters, and contact with racially and ideologically diverse characters are contingent upon identity exploration.

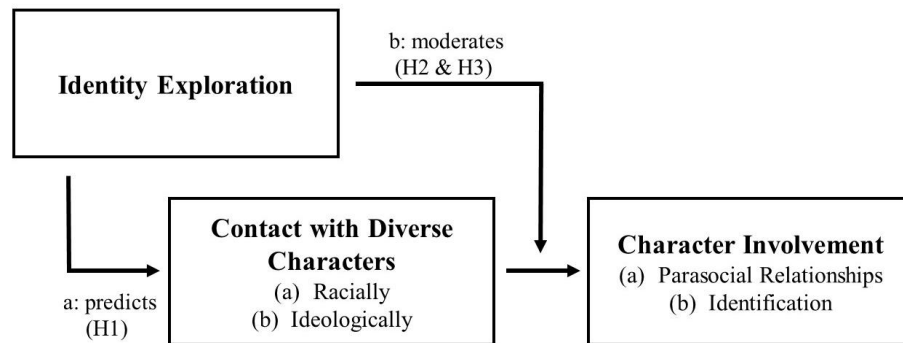


Figure 5.1 Conceptual Model

Hypotheses

H1: Identity exploration will increase contact with television characters of (a) racial and (b) ideological out-groups.

H2: Identity exploration will increase the intensity of contact's effects on (a) parasocial relationships and (b) identification with television characters of different social groups.

H3: Identity exploration increases the intensity of contact's effects on (a) parasocial relationship and (b) identification with characters with different ideologies.

Method

Respondents

Emerging adults ($N = 916$) were recruited from Amazon MTurk and were compensated \$1 for their time. To focus on emerging adulthood, only 18 to 25 year-olds were recruited for this survey. During data cleaning, 291 respondents were removed because they did not complete the survey. An additional 78 respondents were removed for not selecting a media character or entering random information. Finally, 6 respondents were removed for entering only a single choice on their survey responses. In sum, 541 respondents were retained for analysis.

Procedure

The survey was distributed online. Respondents were asked to select a television character for whom they had an affinity. In selecting this character, respondents were asked, "Reflect on your television viewing experiences. Please select a fictional television character that you particularly like. Please provide the full name of this character." Respondents then provided the show the selected character was from and demographic information about the character, including their perception of the

character's race and ideology. Then, respondents completed measures of character involvement (i.e., identification and parasocial relationship as well as engagement in identity exploration, their ideology, and demographic information. Measures included in this survey can be found in Appendix E.

Measures

Racial Diversity. Respondents were asked to indicate their racial/ethnic background (66.1% White, 10.4% Black, 9.1% Asian, 11.7% Hispanic, 1.6% Native American, .5% Pacific Islander, .5% Other) and well as their perception of their selected character's racial background (75.4% White, 5.8% Black, 7.7% Asian, 1.8% Hispanic, 1.5% Native American, .2% Pacific Islander, 7.7% Other). Racial diversity of characters was calculated by finding the difference between respondents' race and characters' race. Then, the data were dummy coded with 0 denoting same race and all other values being coded as 1 different race. 42.2% of the respondents selected a racially diverse character.

Ideological Difference. Respondents were asked 3 items indicating their ideology on social, economic, and religious issues (e.g., "In terms of [social/economic/religious] issues would you say you are:"). Responses ranged from 1-Very liberal to 7-Very conservative). Respondents were then asked the same questions on their perceptions of their selected character's ideology (e.g., "To your best ability describe [name]'s ideology:" "In terms of [social/economic/religious] issues would you say [name] is:"). Responses ranged from 1-Very liberal to 7-Very conservative ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.37$; $\alpha = .82$). Ideological difference with characters was then calculated by finding the absolute

value of the difference between respondents' ideology and characters' ideology (0-No Differences to 6-Extreme Difference; $M = 1.21$, $SD = 1.14$).

Identity Exploration. Respondents' engagement with identity exploration was measured using seven items from the identity exploration subscale on the Inventory of Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood (IDEA; Reifman, Arnett, & Colwell, 2007). Items were adapted from a question format to a statement format to be consistent with the remainder of the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to "Think of this time of your life. By 'time in your life' we refer to the present time, plus the last few years that have gone by, and the next few years to come, as you see time. In short, think of a roughly 5-year period, with the present in the middle. This period of your life is a time in which you are:". Then respondents were given the following statements: "Finding out who you are." "Separating from parents." "Defining yourself." "Planning for the future." "Seeking a sense of meaning." "Deciding on your own beliefs and values." "Learning to think for yourself." Responses ranged from 1-Strongly Disagree to 7-Strongly Agree ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 1.06$; $\alpha = .84$).

Parasocial relationship. Respondents' PSR with the character selected was measured using three items from Slater, Ewoldsen, and Woods (2018). Respondents were given the following statement: "I like to imagine [name] as someone I know personally." "I often feel like [name] is a person I know and care about." "I like to talk about what [name] is like as a person." Responses ranged from 1-Strongly Disagree to 7-Strongly Agree ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.53$; $\alpha = .82$).

Identification. Respondents' identification with the characters selected was measured using a modified version of the identification scale (Cohen, 2001). Six items of this scale were selected to assess three dimensions of identification: absorption (i.e., "When viewing [show], I feel as if I am part of the action." "When viewing [show], I forget myself and am fully absorbed."), perspective taking (i.e., "I am able to understand the events in [show] in a manner similar to that in which [name] understands them" "When viewing, I feel I can really get inside [name]'s head."), and motivations (i.e., "When viewing [show], I can feel the emotions [name] portrayed." "When viewing [show], I want [name] to succeed in achieving his or her goals"). Responses ranged from 1-Strongly Disagree to 7-Strongly Agree ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.11$; $\alpha = .84$).

Covariates. Respondents were asked to provide information on their gender (61.3% female, 37.4% male), age ($M = 23.76$, $SD = 1.51$), and political affiliation (14.8% Republican, 48.2% Democrat, 37% Other).

Analytic Technique

The SPSS macro PROCESS v3.3 was used to examine the many of the study's hypotheses (Hayes, 2018). Specifically, moderation analyses were performed (using Model 1) to examine the influence of (a) racial diversity of characters and (b) ideological differences with characters on (a) PSR with characters and (b) identification with characters moderated by identity exploration. The moderation analyses were run separately with racial diversity of characters as an independent variable, and ideological differences as an independent variable as well as with PSR as a dependent variable, and identification as a dependent variable. Four models were run in total. For each model,

race, gender, and partisan identification were included as control variables. Effects were examined using a bootstrap analysis with 10,000 bootstrap samples and a 95% Confidence Interval (CI).

Results

Table 1 displays correlations between the key variables in the study.

Table 5.1 Pearson correlation matrix for key variables

Variables	2	3	4	5
1. Identity Exploration	-.03	.07	.21*	.27*
2. Racial Diversity	1	-.03	.00	-.04
3. Ideological Differences		1	-.05	.03
4. Parasocial Relationship			1	.66*
5. Identification				1

Note. * Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

As seen on Table 2, identity exploration did not predict contact with racially diverse characters, $b = -.11$, $SE = .10$, $p = .279$. Thus, H1a was not supported. In examining covariates, none white respondents had greater contact with racially diverse characters than white respondents $b = -2.85$, $SE = .26$, $p < .001$. Republicans had less contact with racially diverse characters than other partisans, $b = -.75$, $SE = .32$, $p = .019$. Respondent gender did not predict contact with racially diverse characters, $b = .28$, $SE = .22$, $p = .207$.

Table 5.2 Results for logistic regression analysis for identity exploration on contact with racially diverse characters

<i>Variables</i>	<i>b</i>	(S.E.)	sig
Constant	2.34	(.61)	.000
Identity Exploration	- .11	(.10)	.279
White	- 2.85	(.26)	.000
Female	.28	(.22)	.207
Republican	- .75	(.32)	.019

*Notes. pseudoR*² = .29

Furthermore, there was no relationship between identity exploration and ideological differences, $b = .08$, $SE = .05$, $t = 1.81$, $p = .070$. Thus, H1b was not supported. In examining covariates, Republicans had greater ideological differences with characters ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 1.31$) than other partisans ($M = 1.13$, $SD = 1.09$), $b = .54$, $SE = .14$, $t = 3.94$, $p < .001$. However, respondent race, $b = .05$, $SE = .11$, $t = .46$, $p = .646$, and respondent gender, $b = -.08$, $SE = .10$, $t = -.76$, $p = .446$, did not predict ideological differences with characters.

Table 5.3 Results for regression analysis for identity exploration on contact with ideologically diverse characters

<i>Variables</i>	<i>b</i>	(S.E.)	Beta	<i>t</i>	sig
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Constant	.67	(.28)		2.42	.016
Identity					
Exploration	.08	(.05)	.08	1.81	.070
White	.05	(.11)	.02	.46	.646
Female	-.08	(.10)	-.03	-.76	.446
Republican	.54	(.14)	.17	3.94	.000

Notes. $R^2 = .04$

As seen in Table 4, the effect of racial diversity of character on PSR was not conditioned by identity exploration, $b = -.03$, $SE = .12$, $t = -.27$, $p = .786$. Since the interaction between identity exploration and racial diversity did not significantly predict PSR, H2a was not supported. In examining covariates, non-White respondents reported higher PSR ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.49$) than White respondents ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.54$), $b = -.58$, $SE = .17$, $t = -3.43$, $p < .001$. Respondent gender also predicted PSR with character, $b = -.55$, $SE = .13$, $t = -4.14$, $p < .001$, with females reporting higher PSR ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.50$) than males ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.52$). Respondents' political affiliation predicted PSR, $b = .48$, $SE = .18$, $t = 2.71$, $p = .007$, with Republicans reporting higher PSR ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.37$) than other partisans ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.55$). Furthermore, the effect of racial diversity of character on identification was not conditioned by identity exploration, $b = .14$, $SE = .09$, $t = 1.63$, $p = .103$. Since the interaction between identity exploration and racial diversity did not significantly predict identification, H2b was also not supported. In examining covariates, respondent gender significantly predicted identification, $b = -.39$, $SE = .09$, $t = -4.09$, $p < .001$, with females reporting higher

identification ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.06$) than males ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.30$). However, identification was not predicted by respondent race, $b = -.16$, $SE = .12$, $t = -1.35$, $p = .176$, or respondent political affiliation, $b = .16$, $SE = .13$, $t = 1.27$, $p = .202$.

Table 5.4 Results for moderation analysis for racial diversity and identity exploration on involvement with characters

<i>Variables</i>	Parasocial Relationship	Identification
Constant	3.47 (.49) ***	4.43 (.35) ***
Racial Diversity ^a	.01 (.67)	-.86 (.48)
Identity Exploration	.29 (.08) ***	.20 (.06) ***
Racial Diversity X Identity Exploration	-.03 (.12)	.14 (.09)
White	-.58 (.17) ***	-.16 (.12)
Female	-.55 (.13) ***	-.39 (.09) ***
Republican	.48 (.18) **	.16 (.13)
R ²	.10	.11

Notes. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, ^a1 = diverse race, 0 = same race.

As seen in Table 5, the effect of ideological differences with character on PSR was conditioned by identity exploration, $b = -.11$, $SE = .05$, $t = -2.01$, $p = .045$.

Table 5.5 Results for moderation analysis for ideological difference and identity exploration on involvement with characters

<i>Variables</i>	Parasocial Relationship	Identification
Constant	2.74 (.51) ***	3.77 (.37) ***
Ideological Difference	.47 (.30)	.17 (.22)
Identity Exploration	.42 (.09) ***	.31 (.07) ***
Ideological Difference X Identity Exploration	-.11 (.05) *	-.03 (.04)
White	-.49 (.14) ***	-.10 (.10)
Female	-.53 (.13) ***	-.39 (.10) ***
Republican	.57 (.18) **	.17 (.13)
R^2	.11	.11

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

Table 6 and Figure 2 display the relationship between ideological differences with character and PSR with character at different levels of identity exploration. For emerging adults who were not engaged in identity exploration, there was no relationship between ideological differences and PSR. However, as emerging adults' levels of engagement with identity exploration increases beginning at level 5.5, this relationship becomes significant, with higher levels of ideological differences related to lower levels of PSR. The negative relationship between ideological differences and PSR continues to get stronger the more emerging adults engage in identity exploration. Thus, H3a was not supported. In examining covariates, PSR was predicted by respondent race, $b = -.49$, $SE = .14$, $t = -3.48$, $p < .001$, respondent gender $b = -.54$, $SE = .13$, $t = -4.10$, $p < .001$, and respondents' political affiliation, $b = .57$, $SE = .18$, $t = 3.18$, $p = .002$.

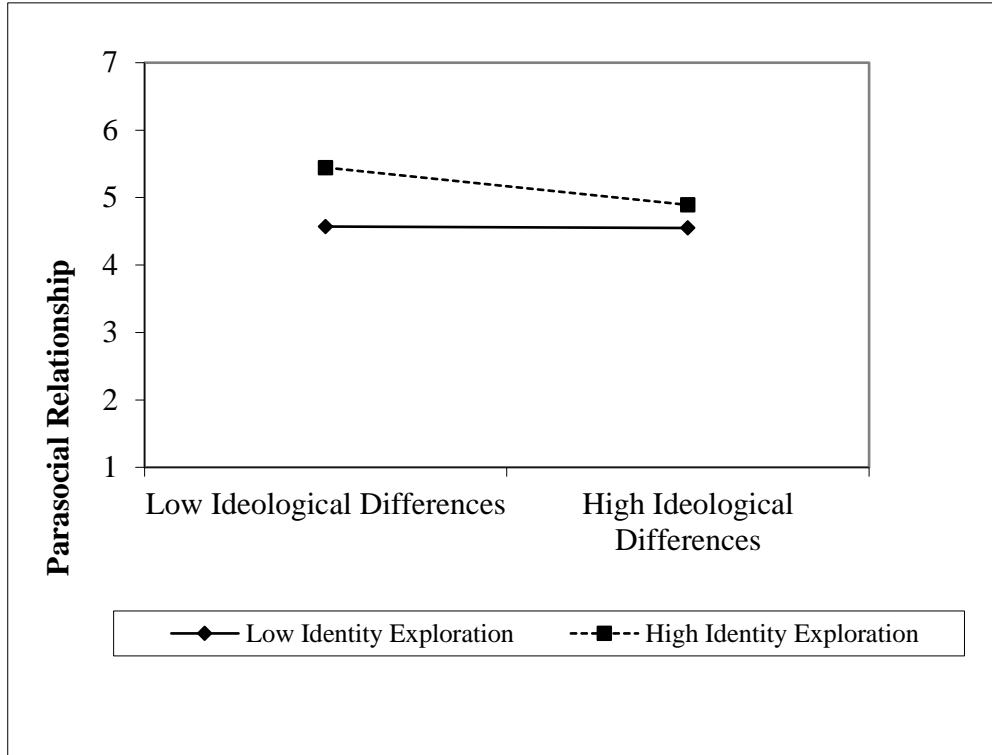


Figure 5.2 Interaction of ideological differences and identity exploration on parasocial relationship

Table 5.6 Conditional effect of ideological differences with character on parasocial relationship at values of identity exploration

<i>Level of Identity Exploration</i>	<i>Ideological Differences to Parasocial Relationship</i> <i>b (SE)</i>
1.00	.36(.25)
1.30	.33(.24)
1.60	.29(.22)
1.90	.26(.20)
2.20	.23(.19)
2.50	.20(.17)
2.80	.16(.16)
3.10	.13(.14)
3.40	.10(.13)
3.70	.07(.11)
4.00	.03(.10)
4.30	.00(.09)
4.60	-.03(.08)
4.90	-.06(.07)
5.20	-.10(.06)
5.35	-.11(.06)
5.50	-.13(.06) *
5.80	-.16(.06) **
6.10	-.19(.06) **
6.40	-.22(.07) **
6.70	-.26(.08) **
7.00	-.29(.10) **

Notes. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Lastly, the effect of ideological differences with character on identification was not conditioned by identity exploration, $b = -.03$, $SE = .04$, $t = -.83$, $p = .405$. Thus, H3b was not supported. In examining covariates, respondent gender significantly predicted identification, $b = -.39$, $SE = .09$, $t = -4.05$, $p < .001$. However, identification was not

predicted by respondent race, $b = -.10$, $SE = .10$, $t = -1.02$, $p = .310$, or respondent political affiliation, $b = .17$, $SE = .13$, $t = 1.33$, $p = .183$.

Discussion

This study sought to examine the interaction between psychosocial development and exposure to media characters on cognitive and emotional responses to characters. In particular, this study examined the interaction between identity exploration with racially diverse characters and characters of differing ideologies on mediated contact (i.e., PSR and identification). Finding suggests that these interactions are not present with one notable exception.

Contrary to expectations, there was no relationship between identity exploration and contact with racially diverse characters. This suggests that an emerging adult's engagement with identity exploration does not influence the race of the character with which they find affinity. However, identity exploration was a significant predictor of mediated contact for both PSR and identification with character. This suggests that identity exploration has an influence on emerging adult's reactions to characters even if it doesn't predict contact with diverse characters. If identity exploration strengthens response to characters, then identity exploration may moderate the influence of character involvement (i.e., PSR and identification) on attitudes towards out-groups.

In examining mediated contact with diverse characters, diversity status of character did not predict character involvement. Furthermore, there was no interaction between identity exploration and racial diversity of character on either PSR or identification. Similarly, ideological differences also did not predict PSR or

identification. Additionally, there was no effect of the interaction between identity exploration and ideological differences on identification with character.

However, there was an effect of the interaction between identity exploration and ideological difference with character on PSR with character. Emerging adults engaged in identity exploration are more likely to have a weak PSR with characters with different ideologies. This is interesting, as this finding is the opposite of what is predicted. While a negative relationship between PSR and ideological difference was expected, it was hypothesized that this relationship would be more prevalent when emerging adults are not engaged in identity exploration. Furthermore, it was expected that this relationship would not be significant if one were engaged in identity exploration. That is, when engaged in identity exploration, ideological difference would matter little in relating to a character since one's own ideology might not be cemented. However, this study has found the opposite. When engaged in identity exploration, ideological differences with characters are more likely to prevent PSR with characters. This may be because when engaged in identity exploration, one's own ideology is more on the forefront. This may make it more difficult to overlook the difference in ideology and foster a relationship with the character. Future research should examine the influence of ideological disconnection with characters and its influence on mediated contact.

This study had a few notable limitations. The first limitation of this study is that only a single character was selected in examining media consumers interactions with diverse characters. While it is common to select a single, "favorite" character when examining involvement with characters, it may be worth examining multiple characters

when exploring interactions with diverse characters. Just as people have a group of friends, or meaningful individuals, media consumers may have a group of media characters that are meaningful. This group of media characters may exhibit more diversity than simply selecting the favorite character. Future research may examine a larger sample of characters that are meaningful to television viewers.

The second limitation to this study is the convenience sample collected via Amazon MTurk. While this sample consists of emerging adults between ages 18 to 25, this sample is not entirely representative of the emerging adults. Additionally, the samples mean age was on the higher side of emerging adulthood ($M = 23.76$, $SD = 1.51$). Future studies should seek to utilize a more representative sample of emerging adults and be more inclusive of younger individuals.

The third limitation is the use of a cross-sectional study. This study sought to examine the influence of development and media use on response states in emerging adults. While this study does succeed in capturing this process, a more rigorous study may examine this process over the course of several years, during which time emerging adults continuously explore their identity and engagement with characters change. Future studies may seek to employ a longitudinal design in examining this dynamic process.

The fourth notable limitation of this study is not including variables that might covary with the main effect. For example, this study might have examined college attendance, since MTurk is not based on a college student sample. Additionally, identity certainty may lend insight into how strongly emerging adults are committed to their current ideological beliefs.

CHAPTER VI

STUDY II

Research on media contact finds that exposure to media characters can reduce prejudice towards an out-group, via involvement with a character (Park, 2012). However, media consumers have been found to prefer “positive” in-group characters (Chung & Slater, 2013). In order for mediated contact to be effective, media consumers must connect with out-group characters. Research on mediated contact must explore potential antecedent that could draw media viewers to characters of diverse backgrounds. One such antecedent could be identity exploration, since developmental processes are argued to predict media use (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Thus, examining the influence of identity exploration on mediated contact was the aim of the previous study.

It was thought that during engagement in identity exploration, emerging adults might seek out media characters as examples of identity alternatives. That is, media characters may function as exemplars of different identity categories that an emerging adult might want to explore. However, identity exploration did not predict contact with diverse characters. To explore this finding, the current study will examine emerging adults’ engagement with identity exploration in three domains: love, work, and ideology. This is done to understand if there is a categorical difference between exploration in the different domains and emerging adults’ use of media characters to explore these identities.

Furthermore, contrary to expectations, the previous study found that emerging adults that engaged in identity exploration were more likely to have a weaker relationship

with characters of different ideologies. That is, similar to previous research, emerging adults did not relate with those of the ideological out-group. Thus, this study will explore emerging adults' connection to lead or supporting characters, but explicitly not villains, that have morals or ethics that different from the viewer. This may lend insight on reasons why emerging adults disconnect with characters more so during identity exploration than when not engaged in exploration.

Research Questions

RQ1: Is there a connection between exploration in the three domains of emerging adulthood and exposure to media characters?

RQ2: How do emerging adults respond to characters of differing values?

Method

Purposive sampling was employed to select interviewees for whom television is an important part of their lives (high television affinity), and who are more likely to be absorbed into television narratives (high transportability). Selecting individuals high in television affinity and transportability allowed for the study to focus on insights from emerging adults for whom television and television characters are important to their lives, and thus are more likely to use television in identity exploration.

Interviewees were selected with a screener questionnaire distributed to a student research pool at a large southwestern university. All respondents to the screener received course credit in compensation for their time. The screener examined television affinity, transportability, identity exploration, and demographic information. See Appendix B for full list of questions asked on the screener questionnaire.

Each selected interviewee was asked to complete a media diary the week before their interview. Emerging adults were to record the television shows they watched and characters they found meaningful in those shows. These media diaries were useful in the interview but lacked substantive information and thus were not included in data analysis.

Twelve emerging adults were interviewed for about 60-minutes and compensated \$50 for their time. Interviews were conducted in a comfortable, living room style laboratory. Interviews were semi-structured following a three-phase design. After questions to establish rapport, interviewees were first asked about characters that they found meaningful. Media diaries were used to begin this process, but interviewees were asked if they could think of any more characters that were meaningful to them. Next, interviewees were asked about their engagement in the three domains of identity. Finally, interviewees were asked to connect the characters that they found meaningful with their experiences in the identity domains previously discussed. See Appendix C for full list of interview questions. This concluded the interview.

To analyze the data, interviews were first transcribed. Then, an inductive coding process was used to analyze the data. This process began by making memos during the interviews. Memos of trends that emerged during the interview were used as the basis for the initial coding of the data. Codes were concepts or meaning quotations that were notable during the review of the transcripts. Only passages that were relevant were coded. These codes were used to examine the interviews further. Commonalities were searched for among initial codes, so that more inclusive, emergent thematic codes could be created.

Themes

During analysis three themes emerged from the data: 1) Identity exploration in the domains of love and career are connected to involvement with media characters; 2) Identity exploration in the domain of ideology primarily comes from other socializers, such as family or church; 3) Ideology disconnection with media characters interrupts viewers' ability to connect with characters except when viewers are not immersed in the narrative. These themes will be explored in more depth below.

Love, Career, and TV Characters

The first theme that emerged from the data is that identity formation in the domains of love and career are connected to involvement with media characters. Emerging adults were asked about the influence of media characters on the domains of love, work and ideology. Many emerging adults noted instances in which they believed characters had impacted their life in the domains of love and work.

In the domain of work, emerging adults connected with characters on concepts like work ethic. For example, one interviewee noted that her perception of her own drive is connected to how she views one of her favorite characters, "Meredith from Grey's Anatomy because she's driven in everything she does. That's how I am definitely- I'm gonna go full force out if I'm going to do something." Another interviewee says this about Rick from *Rick & Morty*, "So even though I said he's not using his intellect to the best of this abilities, he's still constantly making new things and constantly going on new adventures, and he's still living his best life, honestly. Yeah, he's been pretty influential on my mindset of 'do what you want and create your own path.'" She also connected

with Katara from *Avatar: The Last Airbender* noting, “Women have to work ten times harder to actually stand out and be recognized for their skills and Katara had to do that.” For another interviewee, when asked about the connection between Will Smith’s *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, the character he found most meaningful, and his passion for fashion, he agreed that his love of fashion and desire to enter the fashion business was connected to his attachment to the *Fresh Prince*. Another interviewee that enjoyed crime dramas noted that he was inspired by the dress and style of many criminals. He says, “Those characters in those crime shows are very well presented and dressed. So that’s influenced me, like when I go to interviews or even just to my day to day job.” Emerging adults seem to use media characters as career exemplars that provide ideals that the media viewer strives to achieve. The characters may have different lives, but they give the emerging adults something to aspire to.

In the domain of love, emerging adults connected with characters on what they were searching for both in a relationship and in a partner. One interviewee noted that the relationships she viewed on television impacted her. She said, “I feel most of the TV shows where there’s a relationship, they do influence the things I want in a relationship.” One interviewee notes, “Sometimes I’ll watch like a romance anime and be like ‘Oh, this is such a cute relationship. I wish I had something like this’” She goes on to say, “The last anime I watched... there’s lot of aspects of that relationship that I didn’t like but they supported each other so well that I was like, ‘Oh, this is something that I would want.’” Another interviewee connected his marriage to the relationship between Monica and Chandler on *Friends*. He says, “[Chandler] always saw [Monica] as a partner in life or a

friend, a best friend. And I guess I connected that to my love life. I always wanted that for myself.” Returning to the interviewee that enjoys crime dramas, when discussing his relationship with his family, he noted that while he was not too keen on their criminal activities, he did appreciate the criminals’ motivations to provide for their families. He says, “Their ability to provide for their parents and their kids... That would make them happy, but that would deeply make me happy.” Similar to the domain of work, when it comes to love and relationships in the media, characters provide models of relationships that the emerging adults pursue. All the relationships are unique but provide an example of what the emerging adult may, or may not, desire for themselves.

It seems that for both the domains of work and love, television characters provide emerging adults an opportunity to explore different identity alternatives. While emerging adults also most definitely explore these domains through interpersonal activities, it seems that the media is another avenue in which this exploration may occur. They seem to connect with characters that they find inspiring and would like to be more similar too.

Ideology and TV Characters

The second theme that emerged from the data is that identity formation in the domain of ideology primarily comes from other socializers. While all interviewees were asked about how media characters might influence their perceptions of love, work, and ideology, few emerging adults drew connections between media characters and their own political or religious lives. When directly asked about this lack of connection, one interviewee explained “My faith definitely came more from my family.”

This seemed to be the case for many of the emerging adults. When questioned about their ideologies, most interviewees seemed to have a clear concept of their religious ideology, even if their participation in religious activities had declined. Less clear was their understanding of their political ideology. However, most of the emerging adults could point to instances where their ideology came from their family. For example, one interviewee noted, “One thing I remember my mom told me that I still plan on my at the end of the day, is not to be the smartest, the richest, or the best. As long as you’re happy at the end of the day, then you can say that’s a rich life right there.” Others could note their disengagement with aspects of their ideological identity.

That said, interviewees rarely connected television characters to the development of their own ideology. Media characters did not provide aspirational exemplars of political or religious beliefs, as the characters had done in the domains of love and work. Instead, media characters seem to be absent in the exploration of this domain. However, it is not worth noting that it is not that emerging adults did not recognize that the characters had ideologies, rather that the characters ideologies did not influence their own. This may be because ideologies may be formed much earlier, leaving little room for media character to influence.

Ideology Disconnection

The third theme that emerged from the data is that a disconnect between the ideology of the media character and the viewer influences the viewer’s ability to connect with the character when the viewer is fully immersed in the narrative. Several emerging adults indicated that when they disagree with a character’s ideology of values, it

diminishes their connection with the character. When asked if she could connect with a character with an ideological difference as well as a character more similar to herself, one interviewee says, “Probably not. Because it would just be too different. I connect with people that have gone through experiences I’ve been through or express similar feelings.” Another interviewee notes that she found it difficult to connect with Olivia Pope on *Scandal* because of Pope's infidelity. She explains, “I kind of stopped watching [Scandal] because I don’t agree with that and she does everything right except that. The storyline was so focused on it that it kind of took away from the likeability of her for me.” For another interviewee, he finds it difficult to connect with a coach character that doesn’t show respect to his players. He notes, “The character, yeah, I don’t think I was a big of him when that would happen... It definitely did change my view on the coach as a character.”

For some, like this viewer, disconnection with a key or central character can lead to disconnection with the entire show. Another interviewee adds, “I find it a little bit harder to watch those shows or I’ll just stop watching... Because anything that doesn’t relate to me or makes me angry, I don’t want to watch.” For others, the disconnection with a character did not end their engagement with the show entirely but did temporarily cause disengagement. One interviewee says, “Certain scenes, yes. I’m the kind of person who if there’s a character I don’t really care for, I just won’t watch for a minute. I’ll get on my phone or whatever. I’ve caught myself doing that multiple times. I guess those were uncomfortable spots for me, so I probably did that.”

However, not all emerging adults felt disconnected from media characters or their shows because of ideological differences. Several emerging adults also noted that they were not bothered by ideological difference because the characters were fictional. As one interviewee comments, “To me personally, it’s just a TV show. So it’s not a real person, even if it’s based on a real person. If I like them, I’m going to be drawn towards them.” It seems that when emerging adults are not immersed in the narrative, they are not bothered by ideological differences with characters.

Discussion

This study examined the relationships between identity exploration during emerging adulthood and their attachments to media characters. Findings suggest that emerging adults turn to media characters when developing domains, such as love and work. However, it seems when developing ideology, emerging adults rely more so on interpersonal socializers, such as family and church rather than media characters. Furthermore, when engaging media characters of differing ideologies, many emerging adults may become disconnected from the character or the show entirely, unless the media viewer is less engaged with the narrative, understanding the story to be fictional or not real. This may allow for emerging adults to connect with characters despite differences in ideology.

In analysis of these findings, it seemed the incorporation of an additional theoretical lens was useful. Social identity theory posits that individuals have multiple identities: personal identities and social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In social identity theory, personal identity is related to self-concept and personal achievements.

When examining the domains of identity exploration in emerging adulthood, both love and career belong here. Social identity is the self-categorization of oneself into a social group (e.g., Christian, Muslim, Republicans, Democrats, etc.) which has been defined by others. The domain of ideology, with its connection to political and religious beliefs, seems to connect with social identity.

Through this theoretical lens, the findings of this study expand our understanding of the influence of identity exploration on contact with media characters. Additionally, these findings help to illuminate the findings of the previous chapter. As emerging adults are looking to explore their identity in the areas of love and work which are closely related to personal identity, they could look to media characters as exemplars, or identity alternatives, for the kinds of identities they wish to foster.

However, in the domain of ideology, emerging adults seem to rarely seek out media characters. Ideology is composed of political and religious beliefs and values, all of which are deeply ingrained and connected to social identity. When exploring this identity domain, it seems that emerging adults are more comfortable turning to interpersonal socializers for this endeavor rather than media characters. This could be potentially because media characters rarely share their political or religious beliefs nor do they tend to share their values outside of work or love. This could explain the results from the previous study where identity exploration did not influence contact with diverse characters.

As for emerging adults' responses to characters with ideological differences, it seems that those who engage with the media characters as if they were real people seem

to be uncomfortable with interacting with a character of different values or social identity. Possibly due to this discomfort, they disconnect from the character or the show entirely to reduce their discomfort. Furthermore, that immersion in the narrative requires personal investment and those who are invested in the narrative may have a harder time investing in people with ideological differences.

However, those emerging adults who are not immersed in the narrative may be able to interact with the characters regardless of their ideologies. For these individuals, they may not feel discomfort interacting with characters of different ideologies and have no need to withdraw.

There were a few notable limitations to this study. The first limitation is that this study only incorporated college students. While most college students are likely to be considered emerging adults, there are many adults who may be engaged in identity exploration but are not currently in college. Future research should examine non-college emerging adults for their experiences of identity exploration and their connection to media characters.

The second limitation is that the sample size was small. In order to include more perspectives on this topic, this study might have included upwards of twenty-five emerging adults. However, it was decided to stop data collection at the current number of interviews, due to environmental factors (e.g., COVID-19) and because interview findings were already nearing saturation.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Mediated contact has been found to reduce prejudice towards out-groups through involvement with media characters of out-groups (Park, 2012). This involvement comes in different forms. One such form is PSR, or the enduring socio-emotional bonds a media consumer feels towards a media character (Slater, Ewoldsen, & Woods, 2018). Another form is identification, or the cognitive and motivational process in which media consumers take on the perspective and goals of a media character becoming absorbed in the narrative and forgetting their sense of self (Cohen, 2001). It is through these mechanisms that prejudice towards an out-group is reduced (Park, 2012).

However, while mediated contact with out-group characters can reduce prejudice, media consumers have also been found to prefer characters that are in their in-group (Chung & Slater, 2013). This potentially limits the effectiveness of mediated contact in a natural viewing environment. Media consumers may not engage with media characters of out-groups and never establish contact with out-group characters. However, there is hope in that the DSMM (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013) posits that development processes both predict media use and moderate the relationship between media use and response states, such as PSR and identification. This study sought to examine identity exploration as a pertinent moderator that had the potential to bypass this in-group favoritism.

Identity exploration begins early on and continues well into an individual's mid-twenties in the developmental phase of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Identity exploration is an individual trying out different potential identity categories (Schwartz, et

al., 2013). During emerging adulthood, individuals continue their exploration of their identity, with a focus on three particular domains: love, work, and ideology (Arnett, 2014). If emerging adults are engaged in identity exploration, particularly in the domain of ideology, that in-group favoritism may be reduced, allowing for involvement with out-group, or diverse, media characters.

Based on this previous research this study had several anticipated outcomes. First, it was anticipated that identity exploration would predict contact with racially and ideologically diverse media characters. Second, it was anticipated that the relationship between contact with racially diverse characters and involvement with the character (i.e., PSR and identification) would be contingent on identity exploration. Similarly, the third anticipated outcome was that the relationship between contact with characters with differing ideology and involvement with the character would be contingent on identity exploration.

To examine these hypotheses, a survey of emerging adults was conducted. However, findings from this study did not support the hypotheses. While identity exploration was positively related to both PSR and identification, it was unrelated to both contact with racially diverse characters and contact with characters with ideological differences. Furthermore, identity exploration did not moderate the relationship between contact with racially diverse characters with either PSR or identification with the character. Identity exploration also did not moderate the relationship between ideological differences with characters and identification with the characters.

The relationship between ideological differences with character and PSR with the characters was contingent on identity exploration. However, while it was anticipated that there would be a negative relationship between ideological differences and PSR for those not engaged in identity exploration and that this relationship would diminish for those engaged in identity exploration, the reverse was found. There was a negative relationship between ideological differences and PSR for emerging adults engaged in high levels of identity exploration but not for those less engaged in identity exploration. Again, while this relationship was significant, it was opposite of what had been hypothesized.

Since, identity exploration was related to connections with media character (i.e., PSR and identification) for emerging adults, an exploratory, qualitative study was conducted to examine this relationship. Additionally, in an attempt to shed light on the unexpected finding in the first study, this study explored emerging adults' responses to characters of different ideologies. A series of interviews were conducted and from the data emerged three main themes.

The first theme was that in the exploration of domains that relate to personal identity, such as love and career, emerging adults rely on media characters. Emerging adults will use media character to set their aspirations for who they want to become. The second theme was that in the exploration of the domain that relates to social identity, ideology, emerging adults rely more so on interpersonal socializers, such as family or church, rather than media characters. The third theme was that emerging adults were fine with ideological differences with media characters so long as they were not fully immersed. Many emerging adults found it difficult to connect with media characters who

did not share their ideology. Instead, these individuals disengaged from the character or the show entirely. However, emerging adults that were not fully immersed in the narrative, finding it to be just a story, were not bothered by ideological differences. These individuals did not find it difficult to connect with characters despite their ideology.

Together, these studies expand our understanding of media contact and the impact of identity exploration. The first study shows that identity exploration does not have a direct relationship with contact with racially or ideologically diverse media characters. However, identity exploration did have a direct relationship with PSR and identification with media characters. This suggests that whereas identity exploration does influence involvement with characters, it might not have an impact on the type of characters that one interacts with, at least with regard to social category.

The second study suggests that emerging adults seem to be comfortable relying on media characters when exploring their personal identity. In the domain of love, emerging adults seem to connect with media characters that display the kinds of relationships they aspire to. Similarly, in the domain of work, emerging adults may connect with characters that display work ethics or characteristics they wish to possess. These domains are deeply personal and emerging adults turn to media characters to provide ideals for personal actualization. However, this does not seem to be the case for the domain of ideology. When exploring the domain of ideology, emerging adults do not seem to examine their political and religious beliefs and their overall values. It seems that emerging adults are not comfortable relying on media characters in exploring these areas of themselves.

One explanation for this lack of connection with media characters in the domain of ideology could be a lack of exploration of this domain in general. It has been argued that emerging adults are not the most engaged in their exploration of their political and religious beliefs (see Smith, Christofferson, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011). It would make sense that emerging adults would not connect with media characters in the domain of ideology, if they were not engaged in meaning exploration to begin with.

Another explanation for the lack of connection between media characters and ideology is that media characters may not serve as well as exemplars of political and religious beliefs, as they do regarding relationships and work. With notable exceptions, characters do not typically share or explore their political and religious beliefs on television. Media characters will label themselves on occasion, especially with regard to religion. However, the characters deeply held religious and political beliefs, their values, are not elaborated on. From a mass media entertainment perspective, networks would not want to alienate viewers that might not share those same beliefs. Instead, media characters explore romance, love, family, and career, which are more universal motivations. Thus, media characters could serve as excellent exemplars in the domains of love and work, but less so in ideology.

When emerging adults engage in identity exploration and connect with characters that hold different values or ideology than themselves, they seem to shy away from these characters. This is in stark contrast to what was initially predicted. However, ideology and value are deeply ingrained and exploration of these constructs might make them more salient. Furthermore, when exploring ideology, emerging adults may not feel

completely secure in their own beliefs. They might prefer characters that already hold a similar or familiar ideology, again turning to in-group favoritism, as a way to feel more secure in their current ideology. However, it is again worth noting that this only occurs for individuals that are deeply immersed in the narrative world.

Individuals that are less immersed in the narrative world may be less likely to shy away from characters with different ideologies. Instead, they view the characters as fictional or fake. This state of viewing the media seems to reduce the tension that comes from connecting with a character of a differing ideology. People may be more willing to engage with ideologically diverse characters if they are less tied into the media personally.

This study provides new insight on the influence of identity exploration on mediated contact. While there was initially optimism surrounding identity explorations ability to reduce in-group favoritism, there was no evidence of this. However, identity exploration should still be considered an important factor in understanding mediated contact.

First, identity exploration did have a positive relationship with PSR and identification with media characters. As mentioned before, when examining the relationship between identity exploration and connections with diverse media characters, narrative immersion should be explored as a potential moderator. Future research may seek to examine if the relationship between identity exploration and involvement with ideologically diverse media characters is contingent upon narrative immersion.

Additionally, identity exploration influences emerging adults' connections with characters in the domains of love and work. While it was beyond the scope of the first study in this project, it is possible that emerging adults could connect with diverse characters not because of exploration in the domain of ideology but instead through love and work. Emerging adults foster connections with characters based on their relationships and careers. If these characters happen to be diverse racially or ideologically, it might bypass the in-group favoritism. Future research should examine if identity exploration influences connection with diverse characters through attachment to the character because of love or career.

In addition to the limitations discussed in the previous chapters, this project has a couple more limitations. First, while this project aims to expand our understanding of mediated contact, it did not incorporate a variable important to mediated contact, attitudes toward out-group members. This study did not examine how identity exploration influenced the mediation process of contact with ideologically diverse characters reducing negative attitudes towards ideological out-group members through involvement with the characters in a moderated-mediation model. Future research should examine this model in its entirety, examining the influence of identity exploration on attitudes towards out-groups members.

Another limitation of this project is that both projects had emerging adults reflect on past media experiences. Assessment of involvement with media characters with ideological differences after direct exposure to these characters might provide further support of the findings of this project. Future research might examine the influence of

identity exploration and transportability on PSR and identification with characters after exposing them to characters that differ from their ideology.

Concluding Remarks

This study examined the ability of identity exploration to reduce in-group favoritism during contact with characters and strengthen character involvement with diverse media characters. However, the findings of this study suggest that identity exploration does not predict contact with diverse characters. This seems to be because whereas emerging adults do rely on media characters in domains related to personal identity (i.e., love and career), they do not turn to media characters in exploring the domain of ideology which is related to their social identity. Furthermore, while the relationship between contact with ideologically diverse characters and involvement with these characters is contingent on identity exploration, it seems that those engaged in exploration have weaker relationships with media characters of different ideological backgrounds. Interviews with emerging adults revealed that this is likely because those deeply immersed in the narrative feel uncomfortable when interacting with characters of different ideologies. This is possibly because they are insecure in their own ideological identity and prefer the comfort of characters with similar ideologies. However, emerging adults who are not immersed in the narrative seem to not be bothered by connections with characters with different ideologies. These findings suggest that the relationship between contact with characters of different ideologies and involvement with these characters is contingent on narrative immersion.

Collectively, these findings expand our understanding of identity exploration's effects on the process of mediated contact. Identity exploration influences character involvement and emerging adults look to characters in their exploration of love and career. While identity exploration's influence on contact with diverse characters may be limited, it may be impactful if emerging adults connect with diverse characters through the domains of love and career. This provides a clear direction for future research and contributes to our knowledge of how emerging adults may uniquely experience mediated contact. Moreover, this line of research has the potential to shape the way shows are designed to elicit mediated contact with out-groups for emerging adults. As more and more adults engage in identity exploration during emerging adulthood, it is important that we understand how identity exploration influences mediated contact with this population.

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APPENDICES
APPENDIX A
SCREENER INFORMATION SHEET

Thank you for your interest in participating in my survey. This research study is about the influence of emerging adulthood on contact and involvement with media characters.

The survey will take 15 minutes and you will answer questions about your media preferences and yourself. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can skip any questions you are not comfortable with and stop at any point. For your participation in this survey, you will earn 0.25 SONA credits, which will be processed within 48 hours of you beginning the survey.

There are no direct benefits for your participation.

There are no foreseeable risks to your participation. To protect your confidentiality identifiers will be removed from the data, after participants have been selected for follow up study. Your information collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Bryan McLaughlin (bryan.mclaughlin@ttu.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, contact the Human Research Protection Program, Office of Research & Innovation, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas 79409. You can contact them at 806-742-2064 or hrpp@ttu.edu.

We appreciate your time and effort for this research study.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW SCREENER

Television Affinity

Here are some statements people make about themselves (or about television). For each statement please select the option that best expresses your own feelings.

1. Watching TV shows is one of the more important things I do each day.
2. Watching TV shows is very important in my life.
3. I could easily do without television programming for several days.
4. I would feel lost without TV shows to watch.

Transportability

1. I react to events in shows as if I were one of the characters.
2. I can become so absorbed in a show that I forget the world around me.
3. Characters in TV shows can seem real to me.
4. Characters in stories feel like friends of mine.
5. TV shows affect my mood.
6. I want to communicate with characters in stories.

[page break]

Identity Exploration

This period of your life a time in which you are:

1. Finding out who you are.
2. Separating from parents.
3. Defining yourself.

4. Planning for the future.
5. Seeking a sense of meaning.
6. Deciding on your own beliefs and values.
7. Learning to think for yourself.

[page break]

Political Affiliation

Which of the following best describes the political party you are affiliated with?

- Democratic Party
- Republican Party
- Libertarian Party
- Green Party
- Independent (no party affiliation)
- Other

What is the strength of your affiliation? [1, Very Weak – 7, Very Strong]

Political Ideology

Describe your ideology. (1, Very Liberal – 7, Very Conservative)

In terms of social issues would you say you are:

In terms of economic issues would you say you are:

Gender

Please select the gender you most identify with:

- Female
- Male

- Other

Race/Ethnicity

Select indicate your racial background:

- Asian
- Black
- Hispanic/Latinx
- White
- Multi-racial
- Other

Age

Enter your age using whole numbers:

[page break]

Interview study

Would you be interested in participating in another study examining your television viewing behavior? Participation in this study will involve keeping a media diary (a log of all the shows you watch) for 5 days followed by a 90-minute interview. You will be compensated for your time with \$50.

Name

Phone Number

Email

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

What is your major?

Are you currently dating anyone or seeking a romantic relationship?

What are your favorite television shows?

Tell me about the last show you were seriously addicted to?

How television habits changed since you entered college?

Identity Exploration

If you had to pick a title book that best represented your life, what title would you choose?

Would you have had a different answer 5 years ago?

Have you selected a career that you find fulfilling?

Do you know what you are looking for in you love life?

How certain are you of your own beliefs and values?

We talked about work, love, values. Are there any other important aspects of your “self”?

Character Involvement

Off the top of your head, what tv character did you like as teenager? Why?

How often do you think you understood the character completely?

Did you think of this character as someone important in your life, like a friend?

Let’s review your media diary. Tell me about the characters that are especially meaningful to you.

Are there any characters are especially meaningful to you that are not listed here?

Can you tell me a bit about each of these characters?

Intersection

How have television characters influenced who you are as a person?

Do you look to television characters as examples of who you could be? Do you have any examples of this?

Have any TV characters influenced your romantic identity, who you are in relationships?

Have any TV characters influenced your occupational identity?

Have any TV characters influenced your religious or political ideology?

Do you have any TV characters that are supposed to be a “good guy” but you disagree with his or her morals or values?

Do you feel that you connect or engage with this character when watching that show?

Do you feel open to connect with television characters that differ from you?

APPENDIX D
SURVEY INFORMATION SHEET

Identity and Media Characters

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study about the influence of identity formation on attachments to media characters. Your participation is completely voluntary, and **you will receive \$1.00** for your participation. We appreciate your time and effort! You will be asked to complete a list of questions about your experience with television characters and your personality.

This study should take about 15 minutes to complete, and you can stop at any point and skip any questions you prefer not to answer. There are no foreseeable risks to your participation. **To protect your confidentiality, your name will not be collected.**

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, contact the Human Research Protection Program, Office of Research & Innovation, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas 79409. You can contact them at 806-742-2064 or hrpp@ttu.edu.

We appreciate your participation in this project.

Respectfully,
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APPENDIX E

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Character Selection

Reflect on your television viewing experiences. Please select a fictional television character that you particularly like. Please provide the full name for this character.

[page break]

Character Information

Name of series

Please indicate what television show [name] is from:

Gender

Indicate [name]'s gender:

- Male
- Female
- Other

Sexual Orientation

Please indicate [name]'s sexual orientation.

- Heterosexual/straight
- Homosexual/gay
- Bisexual/Pansexual
- Other

Age

Please select the age range that best describes [name]:

- 0-5 years-old
- 6-12 years-old
- 13-17 years-old
- 18-25 years-old
- 26-35 years-old
- 36-49 years-old
- 50+ years-old

Ethnicity

Please indicate [name]'s ethnicity.

- Asian
- Black
- Caucasian/White
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Native American/Alaskan Native
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- Other

Ideology

To the best of your ability describe [name]'s ideology: (1, Very Liberal – 7, Very Conservative)

1. In terms of social issues would you say [name] is:
2. In terms of economic issues would you say [name] is:
3. In terms of religious issues would you say [name] is:

[page break]

For each of the following statements, please select the option that best expresses your own feelings about [name]:

Parasocial Relationship

1. I like to imagine [name] as someone I know personally.
2. I often feel like [name] is a person I know and care about.
3. I like to talk to others about what [name] is like as a person.

Identification

1. When viewing [show], I feel as if I am part of the action.
2. When viewing [show], I forget myself and am fully absorbed.
3. I am able to understand the events in [show] in a manner similar to that in which [name] understands them.
4. When viewing [show], I can feel the emotions [name] portrayed.
5. When viewing, I feel I can really get inside [name]'s head.
6. When viewing [show], I want [name] to succeed in achieving his or her goals.

[page break]

Identity Exploration

Think of this time in your life. By “time in your life” we refer to the present time, plus the last few years that have gone by, and the next few years to come, as you see time. In short, think of a roughly 5-year period, with the present in the middle.

This period of your life is a time in which you are:

1. Finding out who you.
2. Separating from parents.
3. Defining yourself.
4. Planning for the future.
5. Seeking a sense of meaning.
6. Deciding on your own beliefs and values.
7. Learning to think for yourself.

[page break]

Political Affiliation

Which of the following best describes the political party you are affiliated with?

- Democratic Party
- Republican Party
- Libertarian Party
- Green Party
- Independent (no party affiliation)
- Other

Political Ideology

Describe your ideology. (1, Very Liberal – 7, Very Conservative)

In terms of social issues would you say you are:

In terms of economic issues would you say you are:

In terms of religious issues would you say you are:

Gender

Please select the gender you most identify with:

- Female

- Male
- Other

Race/Ethnicity

Select indicate your racial background:

- Asian
- Black
- Caucasian/White
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Native American/Alaskan Native
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- Other

Age

Enter your age using whole numbers: