THE PARASOCIAL CONTACT HYPOTHESIS:
IMPLICATIONGS FOR CHANGING RACIAL ATTITUDES

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Masters of Art
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ABSTRACT

The following is an examination of the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis. This theoretical framework combines the principles of Inter Contact Theory and parasocial relationships to suggest that a person's stereotypical attitudes towards members of differing groups can be suspended by encountering those groups in the media. The framework was studied in light of Social Identity Theory. The author measured the attitudes of a non-black sample towards African Americans and their own ethnic group and then exposed to a sitcom that featured a predominantly African American cast. The sample's attitudes towards blacks were again assessed, along with their attitudes towards the shows and its characters. The author found that overall, exposure to the sitcom was not enough to change attitudes towards African Americans, but parasocial activity can predict attitudes toward a show and its characters. Other findings and directions for future research are also discussed.
Dedicated to Ma and Grandma
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

An old yet persistent adage in our society is that people fear what they do not know. Though fear may be a strong word to describe the feelings one has when encountering a novel situation, a certain level of anxiety is to be expected. Driving to an unusual destination, or one’s first time eating exotic cuisine are situations were this anxiety might arise.

Social scientists have often attempted to describe the process that people go through to familiarize themselves to new surroundings or other untried circumstances through Uncertainty Reduction (Berger, 1975). Many scholars agree that once a person becomes familiar with a particular condition, their anxiety level towards it is often drastically reduced. The process has been applied to social interaction as well.

Allport (1954) described what later became Inter Contact Theory, or the Contact Hypothesis. Simply put, spending more time with a person whose background is different from one’s own or out-group, can significantly decrease the level of prejudice one has toward other members of that same out-group. The theory has most often been applied to in-group and out-group members from different ethnic or racial backgrounds.
In Allport’s original conceptualization, members of the in-group and out-group were to have sustained personal contact with one another in order to produce this desired effect, however, in modern society, people come into contact with others quite often via mediated sources. Through use of technologies like television and the internet, people are exposed to a number of out-groups that they may or may not have regular contact with in their everyday life. The question remains, is it possible to reduce prejudice of out-group members only encountered through the media? Recent research suggests it is a possibility.

In 2005, Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes suggested people could potentially decrease their reliance on stereotypes and levels of prejudice towards a particular group simply by being exposed to media in which those groups were featured. They called their concept the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis (PCH) and argued that it could, “provide the experience to reduce prejudice, particularly if a majority group member has limited opportunity for interpersonal contact with minority group members,” (p.97). Schiappa et al. focused their research on sexual orientation, but it is possible that PCH could be extended to other areas.

The following is a project proposal looking at the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis in the context of race. Reliance on negative stereotypes can result in racial prejudice, and the media is often implicated for broadcasting these stereotypes. According to Mastro and Tropp (2004), “The media have long been criticized for the unfavorable nature of Black representations on television. Although the quantity of these images has improved,
characterizations vary dramatically by genre, maintaining doubts as to their overall quality,” (p.119). Research has shown that negative images can affect a person’s perceptions of a group. PCH posits that the same is conversely true for positive images. If this is so, then it is important that research is conducted in this area because it could be the tool to help eradicate racial prejudice in the broader society.

The following contains an extensive review of the relevant literature as well as a discussion of a study done by the current researcher.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The origins of the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis are housed in its name. Paraoscialism and the Contact Hypothesis have been studied at length in social science discourse. The following reviews the theories’ conceptualizations and some major empirical findings.

2.1 Parasocial Interaction and Relationships

Horton and Wohl are credited with introducing the concept of parasocialism in 1956. The authors’ researched focused on the response of the audience when a television show host or other mediated character visually addresses an audience by looking directly into the camera. Horton and Strauss (1957) assert, “Parasocial Interaction resembles personal interaction in that one party appears to address the others directly, adjusting his action to the latter’s responses. They may experience this encounter as immediate, personal and reciprocal but these qualities are illusory and presumably not shared by the speaker,” (pg. 580).

In this original characterization, Horton and Strauss argued that audiences have an experience similar to interpersonal interaction because of the juxtaposition of media figure and camera, which mocks eye contact with that figure. The authors state, “The social psychological processes involved in an audience’s subjective participation in the
television program are not radically different from those occurring in everyday social activity,” (pg. 587). In a review of parasocial interaction, Giles (2002) stated parasocial interaction was not widely studied following its initial conception in the 1950s, but there was a resurgence of its use starting in the 1980s and lasts until present day.

Later scholars who studied parasocialism looked more at the dynamics of the social connection that evolves between viewer and on-air personality. Perse and Reuben (1989) described parasocialism as, “The perceived interpersonal relationship on the part of the television viewer with a mass media persona,” (pg.59). In this characterization of the concept, the authors stipulate that the interaction of viewer with media figure can lead the viewer to perceive a bond with that media figure. It is this bond, according to Schiappa et al., that serves as a catalyst to reduce prejudicial attitudes.

Scholars have come to conflicting conclusion in regards to what kinds of people develop parasocial relationships. Perloff (1983) found that elderly participants exhibit more dependence on parasocial relationships when they were dissatisfied with their living arrangements or lonely. The author asserted that the elderly view the characters in their entertainment programs as companions. In fact, many researchers have looked at the relationship between loneliness, television use, and the development of parasocial relationships.

However, Cohen (2003) finds fault with speculation that parasocial relationships grow out of a viewer’s social deficits. The author suggested that parasocial relationships actually complement other social relationships and in studying them, he has found they
share the same emotional aspects as other real-world social relationships. The authors concluded that parasocial relationships should be viewed as we do other social frameworks. If these findings are accurate, it would make a stronger argument for the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis because it would mean anyone, not just those it states of social isolation, would have the ability to develop the necessary bond with mediated figures that leads to changing perceptions of out-groups.

Those who acquire parasocial relationships have been found to think about the character beyond what is presented in the television show in which they are featured. The participants in Cohen’s study felt as though they could accurately predict the thoughts and feelings of those with which they had parasocial relationships. The researcher determined that parasocial relationships have a link to Berger’s concept of uncertainty reduction by using the passive strategies of watching and the active strategy of talking about media personas with other people. In this way, the author contends viewer involvement enhances the parasocial relationship, (pg. 60). As mentioned earlier, uncertainty reduction is a key component in changing perceptions. Should parasocial relationships have a link to this concept, it would prove advantageous for augmenting attitudes.

Other researchers have made additions to the concept as it is presently studied. Papa et al. (2000) define referential parasocial interaction as the degree to which audiences relate the experiences of the media personas to their own lives. The viewer may not develop an interpersonal relationship with the mediated figure, but the authors
argue a person who reports having shared experiences with the character it exhibiting a form of parasocialism because they have made a connection with that figure. This would aid the argument for the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis because when a viewer sees themselves in a mediated character that has a dissimilar background from their own, it is possible that they would no longer focus on those things that separate them, but on their commonalities. This could aid in changing prejudicial attitudes.

The degree to which a person develops a parasocial relationship with a media persona may not always be a causal factor for other variables, but it has been noted as a conditional effect. According to Eyal and Rubin (2003), parasocial interaction could be the mediating link between aggression and identifying with aggressive characters. The authors found that people who tended to be more aggressive often developed parasocial relationships with characters who had similar aggressive tendencies. The authors conclude that identification with characters can be enhanced when viewers are involved parasocially, (pg. 77). Again, this identification could be beneficial for suspending prejudice.

Parasocial interaction and relationships have mostly been studied as one-dimensional concepts. Auter and Palmgreen (2000) were the first to suggest that perhaps parasocial interaction is multidimensional. According to the authors, in order to claim a person is in a parasocial relationship with a media figure, that person must first identify with the persona, have interest in that persona, like that persona’s method of solving
problems and they should be able to see themselves as interacting in a group with that persona, or fitting in with the friends the persona already has.

Based on previous conceptualizations and the empirical findings, it is clear that Schiappa et al. developed the parasocial aspect of their hypothesis around the notion that these relationships contain the necessary qualities to solicit attitude responses to the characters and the groups they represent. From there, the characteristics of the Contact Hypothesis come into play to round out their hypothesis.

2.2 Contact Hypothesis

Before Allport introduced ICT in 1954, research was already underway to discover how Americans could reduce their prejudices, especially those involving race. Dovidio et al. (2003) found that Zeligs and Hendrickson were some of the first researchers to uncover that intergroup contact decrease bias among school children during the 1930s, (pg. 6). The authors also argued that Tredwell Smith reported finding reduced prejudice for those white college students exposed to black leaders in Harlem for a number of weekends, while the level of prejudice in the control group remained stable. (pg. 6). Another study by Singer and Stouffer published in the late 1940s asserted that white soldiers who had combat experience with soldiers of other races were also more tolerant of them. (pg. 7). A final preceding study the authors found was in Williams 1947 piece, the Reduction of Intergroup Tension. He argues working on projects as equals can lead to decreased tensions, (pg.7).
Allport stated prejudice against out-groups can be decreased by coming into contact with these groups and Wilson (1995) states that in addition to reducing prejudice, over time contact between ingroup and outgroup members could also potentially lead to decreased social distance between these groups. Still, contact alone is not sufficient for changing attitudes. Allport advanced certain necessary conditions for this contact to be effective. According to the researcher, there must be a sense of equality in social status, there must be cooperation among the contact members, there should be some shared goal and they must enjoy support of outside authority figures. This contact must be sustained over a period of time and not be superficial, (Dovido et al., 2003).

These conditions do appear to be somewhat detrimental to Schiappa et al.’s concept. There is no way to ensure that a mediated figure will fulfill all these conditions. Cooperation and non-superficiality appear to be especially difficult to fulfill because the mediated figure and viewer never actually interact. However, research following Allport’s original conceptualization concludes that all of these conditions do not have to be present for the Contact Hypothesis to be supported. Caspi (1984) found contact helped to change perceptions of the elderly in young children. His conclusions refuted the equal status condition because not only were the elderly subjects in this study superior in age, but they were acting as teachers for the children, placing them in a position of authority. Amir (1969) also found attitude change could occur for ingroup members who met outgroup members of a higher status.
In order for ICT to be successful, research shows that the experience has to be generalizeable. According to Desforges et al. (1997), the extent to which the ingroup members see the outgroup contacts as representative of all members of the outgroup dictates the success of the outgroup. If the ingroup member feels the contact is only a subset of those they are supposed to represent, there attitudes will not be modified.

This may prove to be disadvantageous for the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis because television portrayals of minorities are often stereotypical in certain genres. Peffley, Shields and Williams (1996) found that on local evening news programs, African Americans were more often portrayed as crime perpetrators than victims. In a content analysis of prime time television, Mastro and Greenberg (2000) found, “African Americans seemed to be negatively portrayed more often than the Caucasian or Latino characters. They were judged as the laziest and the least respected; their dress was the most provocative and most disheveled,” (p.700).

To increase the likelihood of the decreasing prejudice, characters must be selected that disconfirm that stereotype. If viewers only attribute the difference in behavior from the stereotype to television writing, it is less likely that they will generalize to the larger population and thus the contact would have failed.

The Contact Hypothesis has been thoroughly studied in the social sciences. The empirical evidence suggests that contact with outgroups can change the attitudes of ingroup members, but personal contact is drastically different from mediated contact. Still, some of the necessary conditions of the hypothesis are possible through exposure to
the media. The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis stipulates that these few elements are sufficient to elicit attitude-change.

2.3 The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis

Though there is little literature to support the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis, preliminary findings do seem promising. Schiappa et al. tested their concept with three separate studies in which they found attitudes towards homosexuals were changed after exposing students over a period of time to television programs in which this group appeared and was positively portrayed. To assess the degree to which participants developed parasocial relationships, the authors gave respondents measures to assess uncertainty reduction of the characters, homophiliy and social, task, and physical attraction, (pg. 99). The authors argued that these measures are indicative of parasocial relationships.

Schiappa et al. expressed that the changed was especially notable for those students who reported not having much interaction with homosexuals prior to the study. They argued, “When parasocial contact is of sufficient quantity and quality to allow the sort of judgments to be made about mass mediated characters that people make with direct interpersonal contact, prejudicial attitudes may be reduced,” (pg. 105).

The only other published work using PCH as its guiding principle was published in 2006 by the same authors. The findings suggested that increased viewings of the television program Will & Grace, a situation comedy that features two homosexual males
as lead characters, correlated with lower levels of sexual orientation prejudice. Again they found the most pronounced differences for those who were not socially involved with members of the gay community.

The present study will look at what benefit parasocial contact may have on adjusting racial attitudes. Though PCH has not been used in this manner, previous research suggests a relationship could exist. Fujioka (1999) reported that media can affect one’s perceptions of another race and this effect was found to be more pronounced when people lacked direct contact with the other race. (p.52). Although Fujioka was looking more at negative portrayals, the opposite should also be assessed.

Though homosexuals and ethnic minorities have faced discrimination in American society and have been negatively stereotyped, there are some noted differences between the two that may contribute to what effect parasocial contact may have on attitudes toward them. For instance, it is only recently that homosexuals have been portrayed on television. African Americans and other ethnic minorities have had a much longer presence. Also, it stands to reason that people have much less contact with homosexuals in their daily lives, or if they do, most often there are no phenotypic characteristics to alert them to this fact. The same is not true of African Americans or other ethnic minorities. Contact then must be taken into consideration when using the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis as a theoretical framework for research that involves racial attitudes and perceptions.
Given the precedence provided by the empirical studies in the literature review, the following hypotheses will be asserted.

**H1: Non-Black participants will report decreased levels of prejudice toward African Americans following sustained exposure to a series in which African Americans are the central characters and are depicted positively.**

Following the basic principles of the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis, participants who are exposed to an out-group over a significant period of time should experience decreased levels of prejudice stemming from that exposure.

**H2: Caucasian students who report stronger levels of parasocial interaction with the characters will report lower levels of prejudice than students who do not.**

If respondents are more interested in the show’s characters or are more invested in the show itself, the principles of the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis stipulate that they will apply those good feelings to members of the out-group beyond the characters in the program.

**H3: The relationship between parasocial interaction and decreased levels of prejudice towards Blacks will be more pronounced in participants who have less contact with African Americans in their daily personal lives.**

In their study, Schiappa et al. found that those who had less personal contact with homosexuals in their daily lives reported the strongest decrease in prejudiced or stereotypical attitudes toward this population on a scale used to assess prejudice towards
this population. It is arguable that this same effect will occur when applying the
Parasocial Contact Hypothesis in the context of race.

Schiappa et al. chose primarily to focus on literature on Inter Contact Theory to
make inferences about how their sample would react to mediated outgroup
representatives, but other literature suggests the connection between one’s identity and
group membership may dictate how they react to contact with outgroups.

2.4 Social Identity Theory

Scholars have attempted to explain racial attitudes and change by examining the
degree to which a person identifies with groups of which they are a member. First
introduced by Tajfel & Turner in 1986, Social Identity Theory (SIT), “proposes that
people strive to achieve or maintain a positive social identity, and that this positive
identity derives largely from favorable comparisons that can be made between the
ingroup and relevant outgroups,” (Brown, 2000 p.747).

SIT posits that people place themselves in social categories that may or may not
be separate from how they personally identify themselves, but their social identity can
influence their behavior. According to Goar (2007), “Social categories express the
attributes and characteristics associated with a particular identity, define appropriate
behavior of those who possess that identity, and ascertain the societal worth of the
identity,” (p. 538). This appears to be a very important concept for parasocial
relationships. It may be the case that identification with ingroup membership may
influence how a person responds to mediated characters. They may look for cues from their ingroup membership to decide how they should react when presented with mediated characters from outgroup.

Scholars have concluded that ingroup identification may influence attitudes towards outgroups and thus spark behavior characterized as prejudice. Goar states that “ultimately, many forms of discrimination and bias may develop not because out-groups are hated, but because positive emotions such as admiration, sympathy and trust are reserved for the in-group and withheld from the out-group” (p.538). Perreault and Bourhis (1999) argued “ethnocentrism and perception of control over group ascription predicted degree of in-group identification, which in turn, was positively related to discriminatory behavior, (p. 92).

The conclusion of these studies suggests that it is not enough to measure the amount of prejudice that a person has for a particular outgroup without accounting for the degree to which they identify with their ingroup membership. The conclusions from the literature on SIT suggests that the development of parasocial relationships with outgroup members may be less likely for those who identify strongly with their ingroup because for them, these relationships may be reserved for ingroup members only.

Social Identity Theory has been looked at in the context of mass communication. Mastro (2003) states, SIT, “provides a conceptual outline that can be used to understand the media’s role in the development and enhancement of social identities when and how they are activated, and their potential to impact attitudes and behavior, (p. 98). This is
especially important for looking at parasocial relationships because when presented with outgroups in mediated form, viewers who rely heavily on their ingroup membership will have that membership activated and therefore respond according to how they believe is appropriate for their ingroup.

Mastro found that negatively stereotypical racial depictions in mediated messages were found to be significantly associated with social judgments. (p.98). If it is the case for negative depictions, then perhaps positive portrayals may also guide attitudes, giving credence to the premises of the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis.

Given the precedence of the findings from Social Identity Theory, these hypotheses will also be asserted.

**H4:** Caucasian participants who identify strongly with their race will report stronger prejudice than those who identify less with their race at baseline.

Research using Social Identity Theory as a framework has found those who identify strongly with their in-group membership are more likely to discriminate against members of out-groups and thus should report stronger levels of prejudice in this study.

**H5:** Caucasian participants who identify strongly with their race and are exposed to a series with a predominantly positively portrayed African American cast will be less likely to develop parasocial relationships than those with weaker ingroup identities

The principles of Social Identity Theory stipulate that ingroup identity or race and class will be amplified for Caucasian students exposed to a series with a predominantly
African American cast because their race is not represented in the program. Because of this, these participants will be less likely to report relating to the characters and therefore will have decreased instances of parasocial relationships.

**H6: The level of prejudice will be at the same level or higher for those Caucasian participants who identify strongly with their race following exposure to the stimulus.**

Because their ingroup membership has been activated by the series featuring a predominantly African American cast that does not exhibit many stereotypical characteristics often associated with African Americans, Caucasian participants who identify strongly with their race will be less likely to form parasocial relationships and therefore will have no catalyst for changing their attitudes. It may be the case that their prejudices will increase because their ingroup membership has become salient, making them more prone to separate themselves from the television characters.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

A total of 62 non-black respondents participated in the first half of the study and 52 participated in the second half. Of them, 49 identified themselves as white. The remaining participants identified themselves as Hispanic, Asian, or Other. There were 37 male and 24 female respondents and one person who chose not to reveal this information. The average age of the respondents was 22.6. Participants were recruited from junior and senior-level courses and offered extra credit for their participation in the study. They were told they were participating in research looking at how friendships and romantic relationships are portrayed on television.

3.2 Stimulus

In order to determine if a television program could sway the opinions of prejudiced participants, care has been taken to select a show that reflects positively on African Americans and may not be familiar to the members of the non-black sample. “Girlfriend’s” is a situational comedy that airs on the CW network (formerly UPN) and premiered in the Fall 2000 lineup. The fist season has been selected for this study.

The main cast consists of five African American actors, four females and one male. The lead character Joan is a successful lawyer in her late-twenties who lives in an
affluent neighborhood in Southern California. The show follows her and her friends as they endure trials and tribulations in their romantic and familial relationships, as well as their relationships with each other. Though the show is primarily a comedy, the characters are well-developed and several episodes tackle highly emotional issues. While the characters are African American, most of the themes presented in the show are universal and would be relatable to viewers outside the African American community.

This show has been identified as a positive reflection of African Americans because the lead characters are employed in prestigious fields, do not engage in criminal activities or other stereotypical behavior as often as found in previous research of black prime time characters, however, it was possible that some episodes would still venture into stereotypical territory. Because of this, the researcher decided to expose participants to episodes that were high and low in stereotypical content. A small group of participants coded the shows for this behavior prior to the final study, and three shows from both were selected.

### 3.3 Procedure

Participants filled out measures to assess the strength of their racial social identification and level of prejudice towards African Americans prior to viewing the stimulus. They were also surveyed on the amount of contact they have with African Americans in their personal and professional lives and on basic demographic questions.
Other measures were included to keep respondents from guessing the researcher’s intentions.

A week after answering the initial survey, participants attended a session in which they watched three episodes of the stimulus. This would equate to about a month of viewing the show as it was aired on broadcast television. Participants were randomly assigned to a high-stereotype or low stereotype session.

Because there are relatively few opportunities for the participants to watch the stimulus, the study was designed to increase the likelihood that they would develop parasocial relationships. Participants were shown episodes that built on a storyline and developed the characters over time.

After participants watched the stimulus, they again responded to the measure that assessed prejudice towards African Americans. They also filled out measures to assess the degree to which they developed a parasocial relationship with their favorite character, and two other measures to gauge their attitudes toward all the characters, and to the show as a whole.

3.4 Measures

Contact and Demographics: To assess demographics, participants were asked to answer questions regarding their age, gender, and race/ethnicity. For the purposes of this study, only respondents who indicate they are white or of European descent were
reported in the results. These questions will be used as independent variables in the current study.

To assess the amount of contact participants have with African Americans in their personal lives, the following questions will be asked: “Do you have African American friends that you interact with on a regular basis?” “Do you have African American co-workers that you interact with on a regular basis?” “Do you have African Americans in your family that you interact with on a regular basis?” For the last question, respondents will be instructed to answer only if they themselves are not African American. These questions will also be provided for other races as well so as not to alert the participants to the researcher’s intentions. This information will be gathered prior to viewing of the stimulus.

**Parasocial Measure:** Although Schiappa et al. chose to use three separate measures to assess parasocial relationships, the present researcher chooses to measure the relationships using a scale designed specifically to assess parasocial interaction. The Audience-Persona Interaction scale is a multi-dimensional questionnaire developed by Auter and Palmgreen in 2000, ($\alpha = .95$). The scale measures four factors: identification with favorite character, interest in favorite character, group identification and interaction, and favorite character’s problem solving ability.

Identification questions include: “My favorite character reminds me of myself”, and “I have the same qualities as my favorite character.”
Interest questions include: “I would watch the actor on another show,” and “I enjoyed trying to predict what my favorite character would do.”

Group identification/interaction questions include: “My favorite character’s interaction is similar to my interaction with my friends”, and “I would enjoy interacting with my favorite character and my friends at the same time.”

Lastly, problem solving questions included: “I like the way my favorite character handles problems,” and “I usually agreed with my favorite character.” All questions are constructed on seven point Likert scales and will serve as dependent variables. This scale was given following viewing of the stimulus.

Social Identification Measure: To assess the extent to which participants identify with their ethnicity, they were given the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992). This measure has passed the necessary validity and reliability tests and has been used in a number of publications since it was introduced. Cronbach's $\alpha$ in this study reached .939. The items on the measure have been constructed to be useful across ethnic groups. The scale includes measures for ethnic identification, behaviors and practices, affirmation and belonging, ethnic identity achievement, and attitudes toward other groups. This scale will be given prior to viewing the stimulus.

Attitudes toward African Americans Measure: To assess feelings of prejudice toward African Americans respondents will answer questions found on a measure of Complimentary Stereotypes and Negative Prejudice (CSNP). This measure, developed by Czopp and Monteith (2006) is a 30-item questionnaire that assesses both positive
stereotypical attitudes and negative prejudice toward African Americans. The scale can be broken down into two separate measures. The authors reported the necessary validity and reliability tests and their initial report. Cronbach's $\alpha$ in this study reached .73.

The CSNP can be broken down into two separate measures. The NP portion contains three factors related to racial prejudice against African Americans: black inferiority, opposition to race-related policies, and aversion to interracial contact. The author chose to only use the NP section of the scale because the intent of the study is to measure the extent to which participants change their negative attitudes toward African Americans.

**Character and Show Attitude and Similarity Measures:** While the parasocial measure ascertains how respondents feel toward a particular character, measuring how respondents feel about the characters and the show as a whole is also be useful information to determine the likelihood that exposure to that show might have an impact on their attitudes. In order to do this, participants answered three separate measures.

Whittler's (1989) perceived similarity scale asked participants to rate how similar they were in dress, lifestyle and culture to the characters in the stimulus, ($\alpha = .94$). Some of the questions on this measure included, "How similar are you to the characters pictured on Girlfriends in overall lifestyle?", "How similar to the characters on Girlfriends are you on dress?" and "How similar are you to the characters on Girlfriends on basic values?".

The students were also given Kelman's identification measures to assess how much they identified with the characters, ($\alpha = .964$). They were also given the same
measure to assess their attitude toward the show, ($\alpha = .969$). The 7-point scales had positive and negative attributes on either end such as good and bad, weak and strong, and not attractive and attractive. Participants were asked to apply those attributes to the shows and its characters separately.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

For this particular sample it appeared that overall there was no shift in opinions of African Americans after watching a sitcom in which blacks were positively portrayed between the pretest \((M = 5.09)\) and the posttest \((M = 5.20)\), \(F(50) = 10.82, p < .001\). The participants answered just slightly above neutral territory for both measures. Although many of the findings did not meet statistical significance, some general patterns did emerge from the data.

The researcher predicted that a stronger ethnic identity would prohibit white participants from changing their attitudes toward blacks overtime. Participants were divided into low and high groups using a median split. Participants identified as having stronger ethnic identities reported less change in their attitude \((M = -3.48)\) than those with weaker identities \((M = -3.73)\) but this was not found to be significant for this sample \(F(50) = 1.56, p = .218\).

In general, the participants did report much personal interaction with blacks \((M = 3.25)\). Those with more African American contact in their personal lives were predicted to have less change in their attitude towards blacks than those with less. There was in fact a negative correlation between having more contact with African Americans and less change in ones attitude, but this was also not found to be statistically significant, \(r(51) = -.131, p = .374\).
The author mentioned that participants would be randomly divided into groups that were exposed to high-stereotypical episodes of the stimulus and low-stereotypical episodes. While there was no official hypothesis made in relation to this decision, the implied research questions was would watching the high versus low stereotypical content make a differences in the responses given by the participants?

For all of the major variables, there was no difference in responses given by those who watched highly stereotypical content, and those who watched low stereotypical content. There was no statistical difference in attitude change, $F(50) = .091, p = .764$; In how similar they felt to the characters $F(51) = .237, p = .628$; their attitude toward the show $F(52) = .496, p = .485$; their attitude towards the characters $F(52) = .330, p = .568$, or in the parasocial activity $F(52) = .002, p = .968$. 
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Identity</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parasocial Activity</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Contact</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Attitude Change</td>
<td>-3.59</td>
<td>.714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show Attitude</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character Attitude</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1: The recorded means and standard deviations for key variables in the study.
Participants reported very low levels of parasocial interaction with the characters ($M = 3.88$). Women reported higher levels of parasocial interaction ($M = 4.23$) than men ($M = 3.88$) and though this number just missed statistical significance $F(52) = 3.409, p = .071$, it is still worth noting.

What was of note was the fact that those who had a higher attitude change towards African Americans from pretest to posttest also developed stronger parasocial relationships, $F(50) = , p = .05$. This seems to suggests that there is some association between changing ones attitudes towards a group of people and becoming involved with media characters whom represent that group.

Attitudes toward African Americans did not seem to affect the chances of developing a parasocial relationship with the characters in the stimulus. The mean for parasocial activity for those identified as having more positive attitudes toward African American ($M = 3.881$) was almost identical to those who scored lower on this measure, ($M = 3.883$) and therefore not statistically significant. The sample was separated into to high and low groups using a median split.

Ethnic Identity also did not seem to affect whether or not white participants developed a parasocial relationship. The difference between those with stronger ethnic identities ($M = 3.97$) and those with weaker identities ($M = 3.76$) was not statistically significant. $F(52) = .531, p = .469$. 
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>High Ethnic Identity</th>
<th>Low Ethnic Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Similarity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>2.99</td>
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<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parasocial Activity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>.872</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Black Contact</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>2.94</td>
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<td>$SD$</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>$M$</td>
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<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
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<td><strong>Black Attitude Change</strong></td>
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<td>$M$</td>
<td>-3.48</td>
<td>-3.73</td>
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<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
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<td>.598</td>
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<td><strong>Show Attitude</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>4.31</td>
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<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>1.27</td>
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<td><strong>Character Attitude</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>$M$</td>
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<td>$SD$</td>
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<td>1.24</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 Differences in means and standard deviations between those with high ethnic identities versus low ethnic identities for select variables.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnic Identity</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
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<td>6.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
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<td>.996</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Parasocial Activity</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
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<td>.920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Contact</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Attitudes Posttest</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>5.18</td>
<td>5.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
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<td>1.05</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Black Attitude Change</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>-3.62</td>
<td>-3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>.623</td>
<td>.872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Show Attitude</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>5.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Character Attitude</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>5.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3 Differences in means and standard deviations between men and women for select variables.
The author predicted that those non-blacks with higher ethnic identities would experience less change in their attitudes towards African Americans than those who had weaker ethnic identities. The attitudes of those with higher ethnic identities stayed relatively the same from pretest \((M = 4.88)\) to posttest \((M = 5.00)\) but this lack of change was not significant when compared to those with weaker ethnic identities \(F(50) = 1.560, p = .218\).

Higher levels of parasocial interaction was however experienced by those who reported having more contact with African Americans in their personal lives \(F(49) = 1.951, p = .05\). It was also reported by those who reported more positive attitudes towards the characters \(F(52) = 3.223, p = .003\), the show \(F(52) = 2.555, p = .027\) and who reported higher levels of similarity to the characters \(F(51) = 3.960, p < .001\).

The author also observed that higher levels of parasocial interaction was experienced by those who reported having more personal contact with African Americans in their daily lives, \(F(49) = 1.951, p = .05\). It would appear then that having more interpersonal contact with blacks increases the likelihood that audiences will be more receptive to developing parasocial relationships with black characters.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.1 Limitations

There were several limitations to the findings reported in this study that could have contributed why the majority of the hypotheses for this study were not supported. They will be reviewed here and directions for future research will be discussed.

Firstly, the sample was relatively small. Because of this, there was not a sufficient number of participants that exhibited certain independent variables (ex: high ethnic identity) in order to make fair comparisons. Future studies should increase the number of participants so that the results will be more generalizable to the population.

Secondly, the study was conducted under very strict time constraints. Unlike the previous research on which this study was based, participants were exposed to only three episodes of the stimulus, and the time in between the pre and post tests was only a week. It is possible that if they had seen more episodes over a longer period of time that certain outcomes would have changed.

Also, the researcher used a convenience sample of undergraduate students from a relatively homogenous population at a large Midwestern university. The fact that this population is often drawn upon for participation in research studies for extra credit, it is possible that their answers may not have been reflective of their actual attitudes toward the subject matter because they were only doing enough to get credit. The author came to
this conclusion because of the number of neutral and extreme responses, particularly on the measure that assessed attitudes toward African Americans.

Finally, the number of neutral and extreme responses could also be attributed to the subject matter in relation to the sample. Although participants were repeatedly told that their answers would be kept anonymous race is still a sensitive subject and it is possible that many people do not want to be perceived as prejudice, even if they cannot be tied to their responses. Because of this, future studies may want to look into assessing racial attitudes with a less explicit measure than was used in the current research.

4.3 Discussion

This study is guided by the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis and Social Identity Theory. Both theoretical frameworks are examined in light of the study’s outcomes.

The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis is relatively new concept in communication literature. Its premises have not been supported beyond research produce by its original developers. In order for the hypothesis to gain widespread use amongst social scientists, more research must be done to ascertain its strengths and weaknesses.

While the researcher took care to follow the original study as much as possible, given the subject matter, perhaps some other considerations should have been made. The sample was exposed to a situation comedy. As noted earlier, African Americans have often been depicted in stereotypical ways on television and sitcoms have undoubtedly been found guilty of these portrayals. Even though care was taken to expose the sample
to episodes that combated these stereotypes, the comedic nature of the program may have been a hindrance. A dramatic series whose themes are more serious and characters better developed may have changed the outcomes of the current study.

Although on the surface it may seem that the efforts of the current researcher were futile, another perspective could lead to the conclusion that the results here are promising. Although many of the outcomes did not prove to have statistical significance, the majority of the outcomes went in the direction that was hypothesized by the author meaning that with a much larger sample, it is possible that the arguments presented in the beginning of the paper will be supported.

In a country as diverse as the United States, it is imperative that steps are taken to ensure society functions at an optimal level. Though the hypotheses were not supported, more research should be done to determine if barriers can be broken down and stereotypes suspended simply through exposure to appropriate media messages. It is worth putting the time and effort into conducting such studies because it could vastly improve tolerance for marginalized populations.
LIST OF REFERENCES


APPENDIX

COMBINED QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PRETEST AND POSTEST
Background

For the following questions, circle the answer choice that best describes you. For ethnic identity, you may choose more than one answer choice.

Age:


Gender:

Part I

For the following questions, please circle the answer choice that best describes you where 1 doesn’t describe me at all and 7 describes me very well.

1. I have African American friends that I interact with on a daily basis

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<tr>
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<th>2</th>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Completely</td>
<td>Completely</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

2. I have African American co-workers that I interact with on a daily basis

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Completely</td>
<td>Completely</td>
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</table>

3. I have African Americans in my family that I interact with on a daily basis
Part II

Answer the following questions based on your favorite character in the TV show *Girlfriends*.

Indicate how much you agree that the statement describes you. Choose 1 if the statement doesn’t describe you at all and 7 if it describes you very well. Please respond as quickly and honestly as possible.

1. My favorite character reminds me of myself.

2. I have the same qualities as my favorite character.

3. I seem to have the same beliefs or attitudes as my favorite character.

4. I have the same problems as my favorite character.
5. I can imagine myself as my favorite character.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Completely</td>
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6. I can identify with my favorite character.

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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Completely</td>
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7. I would like to meet the actor who played my favorite character.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Completely</td>
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8. I would watch the actor on another program.

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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Completely</td>
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<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Completely</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

10. I hoped my favorite achieved his or her goals.
11. I care about what happens to my favorite character.

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree  Agree
Completely  Completely

12. I like hearing the voice of my favorite character.

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree  Agree
Completely  Completely

13. My favorite character's interactions are similar to mine with friends.

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree  Agree
Completely  Completely

14. My favorite character's interactions are similar to mine with family.

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree  Agree
Completely  Completely

15. My friends are like my favorite character.

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree  Agree
Completely  Completely

16. I'd enjoy interacting with my favorite character and my friends at same time.

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree  Agree
Completely  Completely

17. I felt included in my favorite character's group.
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<th>7</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18. I can relate to my favorite character's attitudes.</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I wish I could handle problems as well as my favorite character.</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. I like the way my favorite character handles problems.</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. I would like to be more like my favorite character.</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. I usually agreed with my favorite character.</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part III

For the following questions, indicate how much you agree that the statement describes you. Choose 1 if the statement doesn’t describe you at all and 7 if it describes you very well. Please respond as quickly and honestly as possible.

I am happy that I am a member of the group I belong to

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree  Agree
Completely

I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree  Agree
Completely

I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group and its accomplishments

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree  Agree
Completely

I feel a strong attachment towards my own ethnic group

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree  Agree
Completely

I feel good about my cultural or ethnic background

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree  Agree
Completely
Part IV

For the following questions, indicate how much you agree with the statement. Choose 1 if you do not agree with the statement at all and 7 if you completely agree with the statement. Please respond as quickly and honestly as possible.

There are so many Black criminals because Black people are naturally more aggressive.

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree Agree
Completely Completely

Housing laws should be passed that encourage greater racial integration of neighborhoods

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree Agree
Completely Completely

There will always be racial differences in intelligence.

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree Agree
Completely Completely

I think it would be fun to have a Black roommate.

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree Agree
Completely Completely

Black people should learn to work hard rather than look for “freebies” and “handouts.”

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree Agree
Completely Completely
Affirmative Action is not just reverse discrimination against White people.

1. Disagree
2. Completely
3. Agree

As a whole, White people aren’t smarter than Black people.

1. Disagree
2. Completely
3. Agree

The welfare system really just allows Black people to “mooch” from the government.

1. Disagree
2. Completely
3. Agree

It’s just not natural to see a Black person and a White person holding hands and kissing.

1. Disagree
2. Completely
3. Agree

Black people could be as successful as White people if they only worked harder.

1. Disagree
2. Completely
3. Agree

White people lose a lot of jobs to Black people because of racial quotas in hiring process.

1. Disagree
2. Completely
3. Agree

I can’t understand why a White person would want to date a Black person.

1. Disagree
2. Completely
3. Agree
I would have no problems with dating a Black person.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Disagree Agree
Completely Completely

The government is spending too much time catering to the wishes of Black people.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Disagree Agree
Completely Completely

I enjoy groups that are racially diverse

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Disagree Agree
Completely Completely

Part V

Below are 2 scales with ratings from 1 to 7. For each scale please circle the number that best indicates how you feel about the TV show Girlfriends. For example, 1 = Boring, and 7 = Interesting

1. I feel that the TV show Girlfriends is...

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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>boring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>interesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bad</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>good</td>
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<tr>
<td>negative</td>
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<td>appealing</td>
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</table>
Next, for each scale please circle the number (from 1 to 7) that best represents your feelings about the characters on the show.

2. I feel that the **characters** on Girlfriends were...

| not attractive | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | attractive |
| not likable    | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | likable    |

| boring         | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | interesting |
| bad            | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | good       |
| negative       | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | positive   |
| useless        | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | useful     |
| worthless      | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | valuable   |
| poor           | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | outstanding |
| not for me     | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | for me     |
| weak           | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | strong     |
| not appealing  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | appealing  |
| not attractive | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | attractive |
| not likable    | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | likable    |

3. How strongly did you identify with (or relate to) the characters on Girlfriends?

<table>
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<th>1</th>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<td>Very Strong!</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Please tell us how similar or dissimilar you are to the characters on Girlfriends. Please circle only one number from 1 (Not at all Similar) to 7 (Very Similar).

4. How similar are you to the character pictured in Girlfriends on overall lifestyle?
   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   Not at all Similar
   Very Similar

5. How similar are you to the character pictured in Girlfriends on cultural background?
   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   Not at all Similar
   Very Similar

6. How similar are you to the character pictured in Girlfriends on dress?
   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   Not at all Similar
   Very Similar

7. How similar are you to the characters pictured in Girlfriends on appearance?
   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   Not at all Similar
   Very Similar

8. How similar are you to the characters in Girlfriends on basic values?
   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   Not at all Similar
   Very Similar

9. The characters in Girlfriends were my type of people.
10. The characters in Girlfriends were people whom I would want to be like.

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree  Agree
Completely

11. The characters in Girlfriends were members of my group.

1  2  3  4  5  6  7
Disagree  Agree
Completely