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## **AGGRESSIVE SYMBOLIC MODEL IDENTIFICATION IN 13 YEAR-OLD YOUTHS**

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### **Abstract**

Although a great amount of research has been carried out about the effects of media on the audience, few studies deal with the process that determines why the viewers identify with a specific symbolic model instead of choosing any other. In this descriptive study we try to highlight similarity identification, focusing on aggressive model identification. A sample of 203 participants, both male and female, aged 13, and with a high socioeconomic level viewed different films sequences. They were asked to answer to a questionnaire both before and after watching the clip. This questionnaire included an adjective list about the traits that best defined themselves, their favorite characters, and characters they didn't like. Results show a clear correspondence between the participants' self-perceived traits and those perceived for the main characters in the film. Self-perceived traits were opposed to those perceived in the main characters opponents.

**Keywords:** Youngsters; Television; Symbolic models; Identification process; Aggression.

### **Resumen**

Aunque se ha llevado a cabo un importante volumen de investigación sobre los efectos de los medios de comunicación sobre la audiencia, pocos estudios han abordado el proceso que determina porqué los espectadores se identifican con un modelo simbólico específico en lugar de con cualquier otro. En este estudio descriptivo tratamos de poner de relieve la identificación por similitud, centrándonos en la identificación con modelos agresivos. Una muestra de 203 participantes, varones y mujeres, de 13 años de edad con un nivel socioeconómico alto presenciaron diferentes secuencias de películas. Se les pidió que respondiesen a un cuestionario tanto antes como después de ver las secuencias. Este cuestionario incluía una lista de adjetivos sobre los rasgos que mejor los definían a ellos, a sus personajes favoritos y a los personajes que no les gustaban. Los resultados muestran una clara correspondencia entre los rasgos percibidos por los participantes en ellos mismos y aquellos percibidos en los protagonistas de las películas. Los rasgos percibidos en ellos mismos eran opuestos a aquellos percibidos en los oponentes de los protagonistas.

**Palabras Clave:** Jóvenes, Televisión, Modelos simbólicos, Identificación, Agresión.

## Introduction

At the end of any given television series or movie, the *goodie*, harshly and mercilessly shoots the *baddies*, leaving the place piled with corpses, and puts the gun into his holster. Shortly after that, with a big smile on his face, invites his girlfriend to spend the night with him or tells a friend he's ready for that drink they have been talking about earlier on. It is like the victims of the hero we feel identified with had no identity on their own. The question is, do viewers really identify themselves with these characters? Rico (1998) points out that such characters, fictitious as they are, are identification models for youths and children alike and that there is certain amount of evidence in this direction, but it is difficult to establish why and how this identification process happens.

It is only logical to think that very young viewers could copy their hero's behavior in order to become like them. This imitative behavior is linked to a psychological process known as identification (Gunter, 1996). For instance, two experimental studies by Eron (1980, 1982) found that the best predictor for aggressiveness was identification with television aggressive characters. Aggression probabilities increased with the degree of identification with aggressive models. After watching films sequences with a violent content, children that identified with the characters less felt less aggressive than their schoolmates. Osofky and Osofky (1998) suggest that continued exposure to violence may cause youngsters to identify less with victims and more with aggressive characters and Vidal, Clemente, and Espinosa (2003) also found that youngsters who spend longer watching TV value violence more positively, both emotionally and cognitively. More recently, Brady (2007) finds some evidence that the greater amount of time spent using the media is associated with favorable attitudes toward interpersonal and institutional aggression, owing to the

emphasis on aggressive responses provided by the characters, perhaps through a process of identification. In particular, frequent male viewers of crime drama were more likely to express positive feelings toward the police and military than infrequent viewers.

The possibility that the endless plethora of aggressive symbolic models present in the media may significantly influence aggressive affect, cognition and behavior in young people has serious implications for the study and prevention of behavioral problems in youngsters. So, this is a capital matter since being exposed and feeling identified with aggressive models leads to aggressive behaviors and cognitions in the long run (Huesmann, Moise-Titus, & Podolski, 2003). At the very least, some insight into the identification process involved might be informative of which youngsters are impacted the most by aggressive role models and develop intervention strategies accordingly and in order to develop policies and provide alternative symbolic models

Konijn, Nije Bijvank, and Bushman (2007) consider two types of identification with symbolic characters; similarity identification, where a person's role model has similar characteristics to one's own, which leads to liking that character more than anyone else, and wishful identification, where characteristics of a character are attractive to that person who does not have them. For the purposes of this study, we will focus on similarity identification.

Torres, Conde, and Ruiz (2002), state that identification results from imitation. They say identification is a kind of imitation where the individual becomes emotionally and emphatically attached to the model. This idea is akin to remote models, like those in symbolic representation media, such as TV or cinema. According to these authors, this developmental pattern is consistent with other features of social development. Identification is non-specialized and has a strong emotional load, and at

first happens by similarity to the model. With time, identification becomes more selective and is sometimes based on emotions, sometimes on personality traits. In the current study (Clemente & Vidal, 1996) it was assumed that the differences between the two concepts are that identification requires some kind of emotional link between the model and the child, whereas imitation involves the mere repetition of a behavior displayed by the model. This behavior can, but need not be, influenced by the identification process. This emotional component is considered by Zillmann and Bryant (1996) in their explanation for the preference of certain media characters (usually the main characters) to the detriment of others (usually their opponents).

So, the portrayal of the main characters as good causes them to be perceived as nice and pleasing. In a similar way, the description of a villain needs some evil trait to be perceived as unpleasant and hateful. The development of a character's role succeeds when the viewers express empathy towards him and especially if they make moral judgments about him (Zillmann & Bryant, 1996). Supposedly, approving a given behavior fosters a feeling of affinity, but the reverse might also be true. Affective predispositions towards the main characters and their opponents depend mainly on moral judgments. It is assumed that the protagonist deserves to be lucky and the bad guys just the opposite. Negative affective predispositions foster opposed feelings: fear of positive outcomes and desire for bad outcomes. Antagonists are thus viewed as undeserving of good fortune. Such fears and wishes are obviously mediated by moral considerations.

Several authors (Dorr, 1981; Tannenbaum & Gaer, 1965, *op. cit.* Jo & Berkowitz, 1996) have suggested that viewers identification with media characters is influential to the point of leaving them moved by the events watched. Viewers identified with the characters can imagine themselves impersonating them, and

fantasize about themselves carrying out what they watch on the screen. Moreover, the anxiety an event can cause in the child does not depend on it being real or not. It has more to do with the chance that the event can be related to his/her inner experience in such a way that the child identifies with it (Himmelweit, Oppenheim, & Vince, 1958, *op. cit.* Cantor, 1996).

In the case of aggressive models in the media, it might be that those viewers identified with the aggressor in a film are individuals especially prone to have aggressive thoughts when they watch violence. Konijn et al. (2007) state that violent media (video games) is especially likely to increase aggression when players identify with violent characters. According to Zillmann and Weaver (1997), personality moderates the effects of media violence, priming aggressive responses in those individuals who already have cognitive-associative patterns linked to aggression and are prone to see violence as an acceptable means of conflict resolution. This perspective means that the influence of the media is increased accordingly to the degree the audience feels involved with the scenes displayed. There are reasons to believe that the perceived credibility of the media broadcast events defines the degree of viewer's psychological involvement with them (Zillmann & Bryant, 1996). From a different perspective, viewers high in Neuroticism may watch more media violence, while viewers high in Extraversion or Openness to Change may enjoy it more. In both cases, violent media is fulfilling different needs that viewers with different personality traits have. Hence, personality influences the level and depth of involvement with media violence (Krcmar & Kean, 2005). Nevertheless, although media violence effects on viewers vary depending on their personality, it is not clear that an identification process is involved. For example, Konijn et al. (2007) found a non-significant correlation between trait aggressiveness and identification.

There are also sex-related differences in what symbolic role models we identify with. According to Hoffner and Buchanan (2005), males identified with male characters whom they perceived as successful, intelligent, and violent, whereas females identified with female characters whom they perceived as successful, intelligent, attractive, and admired. This outcome, albeit for wishful identification, suggests that young men, as well as boys, find violent characters to be worthy role models.

As Bandura and Walters (1974) point out, the media exert a great influence on social behavior patterns. Most youths are constantly exposed to role models, mainly through television and these models play an essential function in behavior adjustment and in changing social norms (Clemente, Vidal, & Espinosa, 1999; 2000; Urra, Clemente, & Vidal, 2000; Vidal & Clemente, 1998; 2000). What's more, identification with aggressors is a widely accepted explanation for aggression imitative learning (Bandura & Walters, 1974). It is assumed that an individual ceases to be the object of an aggression and becomes himself an aggressor when he starts endorsing the attributes of the aggressive menacing model, as a means of decreasing her/his stress. Outcomes also have an effect on modeling, and from this perspective if the aggressive model's behavior leads to social and material rewards, children will identify with him/her, even if they do not like the model's attributes. Furthermore, according to the General Aggression Model, when violent stimuli are repeatedly presented in a positive emotional context (like violent actions being rewarded) fear and anxiety initial reactions are reduced (Carnagey, Anderson, & Bushman, 2007).

### **Hypotheses**

The aim of this study is to check to what extent the attributes of the young viewer are similar to those of their favorite characters and different from their adversaries' attributes. We also intend to examine how under-18s justify their



identification with violent main characters and why they reject their equally violent opponents. Hence, the hypotheses to be tested in this research are:

H1. The greater number of self-identification attributes a youngster shares with a film character, the greater possibilities that this character is chosen as his/her favorite.

H2. The least self-identification attributes a youngster shares with a character, the bigger chance that this character is chosen as his/her antagonist.

H3. When the favorite character is violent, the youngster will accept him or her.

H4. When the antagonist character is depicted as violent, the youngster will not identify with him/her and will reject him/her.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants in our sample were 203 children aged 13. They were 66.5% male and 33.5% female, all belonging to independent religious schools in Madrid. Most of their parents had gone to college, that is, their educational level was high (74.4% of the fathers and 64.7% of the mothers had reached college). Thus, according to their social extraction, these parents were regarded as the most likely to pay a greater attention to their children and to exert a greater control on their children TV exposure. Almost 30% of the participants report that they watch television alone. The average number of TV sets per family is 2.4 (mode=2). Regarding the kind of shows the participants like best, films are the most viewed (over 50% of our sample). The second most viewed shows are serials (20%) followed by humor shows (10%) and cartoons (10%). Children were also asked for their liking for media violence on a 1 to 4 scale (1=not at all; 4=very much). The average response to this question was 2.5. Surprisingly, when asked whether their friends liked violence or not they answered that 85% do. So, it may be possible that this response was related to a social desirability

effect. Children understand that it is not socially acceptable to show a liking for violence, but there is no problem to tell others like it. The same happens in the case of parents: children report that just 15% of their parents like violence (obviously, according to their perception), although this figure does not quite match the answer to the next question in the questionnaire, where 60% of the children report that their parents allow them to watch media violence without constraints.

### **Measures**

Participants were divided into three groups to test different types of character attributes regarding violence. Accordingly, three video films were selected. From each film we selected a 15-minute clip. All of them were appropriate for 13-year-old viewers in the industry rating system. Of the three clips we presented to the participants two of them displayed different types of violence and the third video didn't show any violence, and was used as a control clip. Each group watched just one clip, so we used an independent measures design.

The film sequences shown to the participants were based on the types of violence (No violence, socially justified violence and socially unjustified violence) described by Berkowitz (1996). These film sequences were also used in previous research by Vidal et al. (2003), and in a pre-testing, both main characters and their opponents were found to be equally attractive and likeable across films:

1. *No violence*. This was the clip used as a control. We chose a fragment from the film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. The clip showed the characters jumping from a plane and sliding down a snow covered hill dodging obstacles.
2. *Socially justified violence*. We chose a clip from the film *Matilda*. The clip showed Matilda, a young girl in an orphanage who discovers she's got magical

powers, playing tricks and practical jokes on the abusive and hateful headmistress. These tricks result intend to kill the headmistress and result in physical harm and embarrassment for her. The headmistress also fights back.

3. *Socially unjustified violence.* A sequence from the film *Perfect Weapon* was chosen. The clip shows the main character slaughtering a number of foes in a fight.

As in Zillmann and Weaver (2007), films were selected to maximize differentiation between violent and non-violent situations (and in our case, between types of violence).

We used the appropriate audiovisual means so the participants could watch the pertinent clip: a video player, and a TV screen connected to the video.

An *ad hoc* socio-demographic questionnaire was built to define the characteristics of our sample and to be administered before watching the film. After the film we presented participants with an adjective inventory and asked them to choose the characteristics that described them better, then those that defined their favorite character and the traits of the character they liked less. This inventory was composed of 30 adjectives, half of them negative and half positive. The participant had to choose up to six to define her/him and the characters. Four open-ended questions were also asked after the viewing of the clips: Who is the character you feel identified with?; Why?; Who is the character you do not feel identified with?; Why?

For the sake of brevity, from now on we will name the process of choosing adjectives to define characters *suggested recall*. We also labelled the responses to the open-ended questions *free recall*.

There still must be pointed out, regarding the film sequences shown, two main issues. The first is that both films displaying violence contain many scenes with a great

dose of aggression and violence (in the first film the characters intend to kill each other, in the second one characters try to kill each other and accomplish it). The second issue is that the three films have age ratings that are recommended for children under 13 (In particular, the film displaying action without violence was intended for general audiences; the film showing socially justified violence is recommended for 7 years old or older audiences; and the socially unjustified violence film is recommended for audiences 13 years old or older).

The measures were administered in seminar classrooms in every school, making sure that each participant could comfortably answer the questionnaire previous to the film, watch the clip and answer the post-film questionnaire.

### **Procedure**

Once contact was made with the schools, we explained to the headmasters the nature of the study we intended to carry out, asking for their collaboration and inquiring if we needed a permission from the Association of Pupils Parents (APA in Spanish, this association exists in every school in Spain) to proceed with the study. When permission was given, we asked the headmaster for an appointment with the pupils' tutor/s from an academic year in which the children were mostly 13. We again explained to the tutor/s what the purpose of the study was, asking them not to reveal this information to their pupils until the study was finished.

Once in the classroom we told the children they were going to participate in an experiment about their ability to recall events, and that for reason they should try to remember as much of the clip which was about to be displayed as they could. They were told that participation was not compulsory and that if they didn't want to complete the experiment they were free to leave the classroom, and enjoy a break. The

pupils who stayed in the classroom were asked to complete the demographic questionnaire, then they watched one of the three clips and lastly they answered to the post-viewing questionnaire. They were thanked for their participation.

It should be noted that the three participant schools were the only ones we made contact with. In other words, no school declined to participate. Also, no pupil refused to participate in the study. Strangely enough, the great majority made comments regarding that the fragment of the film viewed was too short (In fact, we chose a fifteen minute clip because in previous studies, using clips that lasted five or ten minutes, the participants complained in the same sense).

## **Results**

### **Self-identification: how the participants define themselves**

Information about how participants define themselves is essential as a basis to analyze identification with their favorite characters. It is also important to consider what we have labelled as “anti-identification”, or negative identification. “Anti-identification” was composed by the traits of the least liked characters in the film.

As the participants could only answer with six adjectives maximum, some traits were barely selected while others were widely chosen.

In particular, we find that the most valued adjectives were: cheerful (chosen by 60.1% of the sample), kind (58.6%), friendly (55.7%), funny (54.2%), polite (43.3%) and affectionate (40.4%). These were the six most selected traits that define the *average* participant in our sample.

As important as the most selected traits, are the less chosen adjectives. An interesting finding is that, although it does not represent a large portion of the sample, 6.4% of the children chose violent as a defining attribute.

### **Identification with media characters (free recall)**

Children usually feel identified with certain media characters. They use to ask each other which character from a film, serial or cartoon, they would like to impersonate. This also happened when they viewed the film sequences in our study. As expected, in the first film, most children identified with the main character, followed by far by Indiana's companion, a small boy. Choices for other characters are almost non existent. In the second film, Matilda gets almost every choice, and the same happens for the third film, where Jeff is the most selected character (see table 1).

**Table 1.** Favorite and non favorite characters chosen by participants.

	<b>Indiana Jones</b>	<b>Matilda</b>	<b>Perfect Weapon</b>
Favorite character	Indiana (75,81%)	Matilda (79,1%)	Jeff (60%)
Rejected character	Girl (46,15%) Old man (33,84%)	Headmistress (77,61%)	Fat man (50,75%) Kim (25,37%)

A content analysis was carried out on the open-ended question about why they prefer (or feel identified with) a certain character. Results show that the participants admired characters for what they did. Liking a character for what he does was labelled as *behavior* attribute. The character is chosen because of his/her actions and the participant feels attracted and is thrilled primarily by action.

**Table 2.** Reasons for feeling identified or not with the chosen character.

	Favorite character			Rejected character		
	Indiana Jones	Matilda	Perfect Weapon	Indiana Jones	Matilda	Perfect Weapon
Physical appearance (pleasant/unpleasant)	3%	1,5%	10,3%	<b>14,9%</b>	<b>22,1%</b>	<b>16,2%</b>
Behavior (good/bad)	1,5%	<b>41,2%</b>	8,8%	3%	5,9%	8,8%
Politeness (polite/rude)	1,5%	2,9%	0%	11,9%	<b>19,1%</b>	0%
Stability (stable/unstable)	0%	0%	2,9%	7,5%	0%	4,4%
Cultura (culto/inculto)	1,5%	0%	1,5%	0%	0%	2,9%
Desirability (desirable/undesirable)	3%	2,9%	2,9%	1,5%	1,5%	1,5%
Proficiency (skilled/unskilled.)	<b>20,9%</b>	1,5%	<b>11,8%</b>	11,9%	5,9%	10,3%
Goodness (good/evil)	3%	7,4%	2,9%	<b>13,4%</b>	<b>45,6%</b>	13,2%
Enjoyment (cheerful/dull)	<b>16,4%</b>	<b>16,2%</b>	4,4%	3%	1,5%	0%
Consequences (positive/negative)	13,4%	13,2%	<b>13,2%</b>	10,4%	10,3%	<b>35,3%</b>
Sexual role (yes/no)	6%	1,5%	0%	11,9%	2,9%	0%
Economic motivation (yes/no)	3%	0%	0%	1,5%	0%	0%
Leading role (yes/no)	<b>29,9%</b>	10,3%	8,8%	6%	0%	0%
Identification in general (yes/no)	3%	2,9%	2,9%	<b>17,9%</b>	2,9%	11,8%
Identification with violence (yes/no)	1,5%	10,3%	<b>35,3%</b>	3%	8,8%	<b>26,5%</b>
Possessing powers (yes/no)	1,5%	<b>47,1%</b>	0%	1,5%	4,4%	0%

The second most mentioned characteristic was *leading role*. Responses under this label are those that emphasize the character as the center of the plot. The third characteristic found in the participants' responses was named *possessing powers*. This category groups answers like casting magic spells or having super-natural powers. Although this characteristic is probably only present in children and young people, it shows that in a fantasy environment the unreal is highly attractive. The fourth characteristic was labelled *identification with violence*. 15% of the responses fall into this category, which is consistent with our third hypothesis. They chose their favorite character (in every case, the main character) because he/she is violent. Specifically they like violence performed by the character. This sheds some light on the participants' responses to whether they and their friends like violence or not. We labelled a fifth characteristic as *enjoyment*. Participants like enjoyable characters that are fun for everybody. A sixth characteristic was named *proficiency* (participants feel identified with characters skilled in what they do). The remaining characteristics are summarized in table 2.

### **Identification with media characters (suggested recall)**

After examining the *free recall* responses we analyzed responses to the 30-adjective inventory the participants were asked to complete defining themselves and the characters. The adjective that implies a greater identification with the favorite character is *courageous* (64.5%). Since the most valued characteristic in the open-ended questions was what we named as *behavior* attribute, it may be that a character has to act courageously to be highly valued. The second most chosen adjective is *intelligent* (53.2%) followed by *kind* (41.9%). Good is the fourth most selected



adjective and the fifth is *funny* (33.5%). Finally, it is worth noting that *violent*, together with *cheerful* get 27.6% of the selections as Table 3 shows.

**Table 3.** Self-definition, definition of favorite and rejected characters.

	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Favorite character</b>	<b>Rejected character</b>
Not nice	1,5%	7,9%	<b>50,7%</b>
Kind	<b>58,6%</b>	<b>41,9%</b>	6,9%
Boring	0%	3,4%	22,2%
Good	27,6%	<b>38,9%</b>	10,3%
Affectionate	<b>40,4%</b>	19,7%	8,4%
Cruel	3,9%	10,3%	<b>49,8%</b>
Unpleasant	1,5%	6,4%	<b>43,3%</b>
Untruthful	1%	3,4%	19,2%
Honest	19,2%	20,7%	7,4%
Intelligent	38,9%	<b>53,2%</b>	4,4%
Responsible	33%	15,8%	4,4%
Truthful	32,5%	13,3%	5,9%
Traitorous	2,5%	3,9%	27,1%
Stupid	0,5%	6,4%	<b>40,4%</b>
Courageous	22,7%	<b>64,5%</b>	4,4%
Unfriendly	2%	5,9%	21,2%
Cheerful	<b>60,1%</b>	<b>27,6%</b>	4,4%
Admirable	3,4%	23,2%	5,9%
Coward	3%	2,5%	23,2%
Funny	<b>54,2%</b>	<b>33,5%</b>	3%
Despicable	0,5%	4,4%	<b>40,9%</b>
Polite	<b>43,3%</b>	13,8%	11,8%
Rude	2%	9,4%	35%
Irresponsible	4,9%	3,9%	8,9%
Lazy	16,7%	3,4%	5,4%
Peaceful	16,3%	10,3%	9,4%
Kind	<b>55,7%</b>	26,6%	3%
Sad	1,5%	1%	5,9%
Hard-working	21,2%	13,8%	4,4%
Violent	6,4%	<b>27,6%</b>	<b>44,8%</b>

**Negative identification with media characters (free recall)**

We will now examine how children perceive characters they reject or do not feel identified with.

In the *Indiana Jones sequence* (this clip did not display violence); the most rejected character is the female main character. A suggested explanation for this choice is that most of our participants were young males and that the female character is intended for the enjoyment of older audiences. In the second film, *Matilda*, the negative role (the school headmistress) is disliked by most children. The same happens in the third film, where the negative role is performed by a tight-lipped muscular oriental thug (see Table 1). Clearly, in the two violent clips, the children reject the main character opponent. So, the key for the children's identification or rejection is who holds the leading role in the film. Characters that are rejected are also violent, so children display an ambivalent feeling towards violence. They feel identified with some violent characters while they reject other characters that are violent as well. Violence seems to be perceived as a means of achieving goals, instead of as desirable trait in every circumstance.

We used the same categorizing system as before to examine the open-ended question on why the participant felt negatively identified with a certain character. Data analyses evince five main categories: *Evil* (pointed out by 24.1% of the sample); *negative consequences of behavior* (18.7%); *unpleasant or negative appearance* (17.7%); *rejection of violence displayed by the character* (12.8%), as expected in our fourth hypothesis; and *general rejection of the character* (10.8%). Results are shown on Table 2. We find again that while violence is accepted for good characters, it is rejected for evil, disgusting, or wrongdoing characters.

### **Negative identification with media characters (suggested recall)**

The six most mentioned adjectives from the trait list for the negative characters are *not nice* (50.7% of the sample); *cruel* (49.8%); *violent* (44.8%); *unpleasant* (43.3%); *despicable* (40.9%); and *stupid* (40.4%). These results are summarized in Table 3.

Violence is again perceived as negative, again consistent with our fourth hypothesis, proving once more its ambivalent nature, capable of enhancing positive aspects and worsening negative perceptions. The rest of the adjectives are cognitive or personality traits with similar meanings (*despicable*, *unpleasant*, *not nice*). Probably participants chose the worst characteristics, including being violent, on the list to describe the rejected characters.

### **Positive versus negative identification**

To verify whether these differences between evaluations are statistically significant, we picked the correspondence between participants' self-definition and their favorite character definition. It will be compared to the correspondence between participants' self-definition and their rejected character definition. The count of adjective coincidences and divergences in the adjective inventory for comparison between self-definition and chosen and rejected characters gives a value between 0 and 10. For the favorite character, the average agreement with participants' self-definition is 3.2, while it was .64 for rejected characters.

Correlation between both scores is  $-.134$ , not statistically significant, showing that these two scores are independent. However, consistently with our first and second hypotheses, a related samples T-test carried out showed a great significance ( $p < .001$ ). These results indicate that statistically there is a significant difference between

children's identification with favorite characters and identification with rejected characters.

### **Conclusions**

First of all, it is worth noting that participants chose positive characteristics to describe themselves. Such characteristics quite match the attributes chosen for their favorite characters (3 out of 6 adjectives coincide), although not every attribute is positive. Both their favorite and their non favorite characters are viewed as violent. Even though they share violence as a common attribute, the rest of the adjectives describing favorite characters are positive, while adjectives for rejected characters are negative. Violence shows thus an ambivalent nature, it is used to criticize negative characters, and to praise the heroes.

Hence we find that, as we pointed out in our hypotheses, that youngsters attribute to themselves very similar characteristics to those of their favorite character, whereas self-attributed characteristics are opposed to those of the film antagonists (hypotheses 1 and 2).

In the film *Perfect Weapon* or in *Matilda*, the participant felt identified with the main character, who displays violence but gets positive outcomes. Bandura (1996) explains this using the concept of moral justification: the main character does the right thing (to rescue a friend or to fight for a good cause) and the viewer accepts his reasons to act violently. Also, Brady (2007) points out that aggressive acts meant to protect oneself are viewed as morally acceptable by young people. Bandura (1996) also talks about advantageous comparison. We can see it in the film *Perfect Weapon*. Although both the main character and his opponent display violence, if we compare the behavior of both characters, the main character can be more easily justified than his enemy (the

hero kills to save his helpless friends, while his enemy kills apparently without reason). Therefore we find that our third and fourth hypotheses are supported by our data. Perhaps, when a main character displays violence, its positive consequences are emphasized (ability to overcome conflicts, its coolness...), whereas, when violence is displayed by a rejected character its negative aspects are more salient (e.g., destructive, cruel).

Moreover, modelling effects vary according to the negative or positive consequences of the model's behavior. It is assumed that if an aggressive model gets social and material rewards, the child will feel identified with the aggressor, even if he/she does not like the model's attributes. This modelling is of course stronger if the child already perceives himself/herself sharing some attributes with the model. This is just what happens when the aggressive model is the favorite character.

The question is whether the child owns these attributes beforehand or is it the models presented in the media what determine his/her development pattern.

Provided the subjective nature of the data collected, it is possible that participants, when asked about the attributes of their favourite character, indicated their own perceived attributes. Instead of being objective in the evaluation of her/his favorite character, the child might be giving his/her own description. This may be a reason for the perceived similarity between the child and the main character. This might be a problem of the study's design, although it is alleviated by the use of open-ended questions and the format of the suggested recall questions. Obviously, if instead of choosing this format, we used a close-ended questionnaire with limited responses it would arise a greater methodological concern, as responses for the favorite and rejected character could be confounded or contaminated by characteristics chosen for

the self. Looking at our data, it doesn't seem to be the case, although a stronger experimental design would be in order to completely eliminate this concern.

Still, it must be elucidated whether the model determines the attributes chosen by the child for himself or it is the child that perceives the character as a semblance of himself. This could be accomplished in further research through experimental designs and training some observant-judges to define, using standardized guidelines, the objective attributes of the characters in the films to be viewed by the participants in the study. These objective criteria would be useful to determine the subjective bias in the viewers.

Finally, we must remember that the child pays great attention to the outcomes of the characters' actions. One of the major reasons cited to choose a given character was the (positive) consequences of his/her behavior. Even if we assume that violence is displeasing for children, the rest of the main character's attributes are attractive, and this helps in the process of identification (and perhaps later imitation) with the character.

This descriptive study has other limitations, one of them being precisely its descriptive nature, which precludes causal explanations. Another one is the age of respondents, because although 13 is a critical age for development and role model attachment, it keeps this study from being able to generalize its results to younger or older children. We also focus solely on similarity identification, while it would also be of great interest to take into account other forms of identification, specifically wishful identification.

In any case, these results provide guidelines for either policies or intervention strategies. It seems that the portrayal of a character as positive or negative extends this connotation to the violence he or she displays. Violence seems to be ambiguous,

depending on who exerts it. Since most characters who employ violence with success are “good” and most victims are “bad”, this association between positive qualities and aggression and negative qualities and victimization is a cause of concern, specially for young people with behavioral problems. As an intervention strategy with populations at risk, it may be interesting to promote symbolic role models which are not violent or that even are victims of violence to foster identification and empathy with prosocial behaviors.

We should also try to make parents aware of what their children watch on television. As ultimately responsible for the child’s education, families should control and monitor what children view on the media so they could have a better understanding and assimilation of its contents.

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