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Media, Identity, and the Self

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Few social phenomena are more important, or complex, than the process through which we come to form our identity. Virtually every action we take, and every interaction we are involved in, is shaped by how we understand and experience ourselves. A comprehensive examination of the question of media, self, and identity is far larger than can be encompassed in a single chapter. Indeed, it would require a volume of its own. A fuller account would involve in-depth discussions of the role of media in child development and adolescent socialization, in cognitive and social cognitive processes by which media content may influence aspects of self and identity, in the sociology of group membership and identity, and in shaping political identities and healthy lifestyles.

Our focus in this chapter is on a key element in understanding the relationship of media, self, and identity: the individual's experience of identity while using media (and mediated narratives and social media, in particular). Understanding this phenomenon is central to an understanding of how media shapes human experience, values, behaviors, and thus society as a whole. We believe, too, that considering the relationship between mediated experience and the experience of self provides valuable insights into understanding the human experience of identity and self.

Self and Identity

The terms “self” and “identity” are broadly conceived as the feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions that individuals have about themselves. Current theory and research on media and the self owes much to fundamental early research in psychology (Cooley, 1902; James, 1890/1981). Since the beginning, theory has emphasized the multi-faceted and multi-dimensional nature of the self. In his highly influential work, William James (1890/1981) distinguished between the *I* (the aspect of the self that knows about the self) and the empirical self or *me* (all aspects of the self that can be the object of self-perception, see also Comello, 2009). The latter is further distinguished into the material self (the things an individual calls his or her own, such as one's body, one's family, or one's work), the social self (perceptions by others), and the spiritual self (in which “spiritual” is used in a broad sense, incorporating all psychological aspects that an individual perceives to be the case about him or herself, such as self-related feelings, interests, or attitudes). In that sense, much of the research presented in this chapter deals with the social

self or the spiritual/psychological self. However, new and future technologies may be able to influence the perception of our material self, such as our body ownership. For example, research in the field of virtual reality (VR; see Chapter 26 in this volume) has shown that mediated experiences can temporarily obfuscate the distinction between our own physical body and an avatar body in a VR world (e.g., Slater, Spanlang, Sanchez-Vives, & Blanke, 2010).

Of particular interest to theory and research on media effects is the psychological perception of the self rather than the “true” attributes of a person. Research on self-esteem, for example, deals with a person’s subjective evaluation of his or her worth as a person, self-respect, and self-acceptance (Orth & Robins, 2014), which may substantially diverge from the person’s actual talents and abilities or their achievement as perceived by others.

Psychological approaches to identity and the self differ as to how malleable the self is perceived to be in response to the potentially self-relevant information encountered on an everyday basis, including mediated information. At one end of the malleability spectrum, research on personality has emphasized the relative stability of traits such as extraversion or openness. Such traits are considered to be a function of an individual’s genetic makeup to a substantial degree (e.g., Dawes et al., 2014; Vukasović & Bratko, 2015). At the other end, self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959) has emphasized the flexibility of the self. Based on the metaphor of life as theater play, individuals are seen as actors who portray different roles for different audiences. Thus, the self-concept is conceived to be extremely flexible, largely depending on situations and changing completely with the role played and the reactions of the interaction partners. Contemporary psychological approaches suggest that one’s self-concept consists of rather stable components but that situational factors determine which aspects of the self are activated in a given moment. These salient characteristics of the self represent the *working self-concept* (Markus & Kunda, 1986) or the *active self* of an individual (Wheeler, DeMarree, & Petty, 2007). When thinking about how media may affect individuals and their sense of self, the question of the malleability of the self is crucial. This framework highlights the need to distinguish media effects that are conceptualized as a long-lasting influence on basic tenets of the self from media effects that focus on the short-term activation of self-related thoughts and feelings.

Thoughts and feelings about the self (and the questions asked by researchers) often refer to the *actual* or *real self*, the (temporal) status quo. However, the self also encompasses thoughts and feelings about potential selves. This includes the *ideal self* (i.e., who we want to be) and the *ought self* (i.e., who we think others expect us to be; see Strauman, 1996). According to self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), perceived discrepancies between the actual and ideal selves increase the likelihood of negative affect, while discrepancies between actual and ought selves increase the likelihood of social anxiety. Potential future selves or *possible selves* are another aspect of the self that goes beyond the status quo (Comello, 2009; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves are a motivational force that may affect behavior by providing personal and concrete goals (e.g., Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006). Engaging with media characters can contribute to developing possible selves, as we will outline in later parts of this chapter.

The theory of objective self-awareness (Duval & Wicklund, 1972) highlights that one’s self (the *me* in James’s terms) is only sometimes at the center of attention (*objective self-awareness*), whereas in most instances we act without monitoring ourselves (*subjective self-awareness*). Whenever individuals become self-aware, norms held in a society—but also personal goals and aspirations and potential discrepancies between these goals and one’s status quo—are likely to become salient. This motivates activities that are in line with these goals. Moreover, particularly

if goal attainment is not easily achievable, activities that shift the focus of attention away from the self are common. Media use can be one of these distractive activities, as shown in research on escapist TV use (Moskalenko & Heine, 2003).

The state of self-awareness has often been induced in the lab by seating participants in front of a mirror, resulting in diminished self-esteem. However, according to Gonzales and Hancock (2011), one's social media profile might also be a source of self-awareness. In contrast to a mirror, though, engaging with one's own Facebook profile increased self-esteem in their study. Social media profiles represent the key aspects of one's self, including one's social connections. Toma and Hancock (2013) demonstrated that engaging with one's Facebook profile can be a potent source of self-affirmation, as social media profiles raise the awareness of values, meaningful relationships, and other essential aspects of the self-concept. Furthermore, unlike a mirror, social media profiles are a form of self-presentation that are edited versions of the self that allow people to put their best self forward.

From early on, research on self and identity has emphasized the social aspect of the self. To answer questions about who we are, others' reactions to one's actions are of key importance (*looking glass self*, Cooley, 1902). When people around an individual praise his or her manual work, for example, the individual tends to associate high manual craftsmanship to the sense of the self. And, of course, others may provide information for social comparison (see Festinger, 1954). Judgments about the self are often made with one or more targets of comparison in mind (e.g., my siblings; Jay-Z; Chris on Instagram; supermodels), gauging the similarities and differences on a salient dimension. These dimensions are often associated with a notion of desirability (e.g., intelligence or attractiveness). A comparison with a target can therefore be that of an upward social comparison (e.g., a rich person on the dimension of wealth) or a downward social comparison (e.g., a poor person). And the consequences can be that of evaluating oneself in line with (i.e., assimilation) or in contrast to the target. With other things being equal, individuals tend to engage in upward rather than downward social comparison when given the choice, as indicated by a meta-analysis of experiments from social psychology (Gerber, Wheeler, & Suls, 2018). The same meta-analysis further shows that the dominant response to social comparison is that of contrast; that is, to perceive oneself to be dissimilar to the target (e.g., the supermodel). It seems that humans have a general tendency to look upward, which often leads to self-deflation (see more on social comparison processes below).

An important dimension of the social self is the perception of belonging to a larger group of individuals. When asked about who we are, we might respond with our nationality ("I am Israeli/American/German"), an affiliation to a political party, a sports franchise, a religious group, and so on. Social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains the relationships between the self, groups, and society. It suggests that the social categories an individual identifies with provide a crucial framework to define one's self. Individuals have multiple distinct category memberships at the same time and therefore multiple social identities, as these group identities are typically linked to different attributes and behaviors. In a given situation, an individual's experience and behavior depends on the salience of the social identity that is active.

Self, Identity, and Mediated Relationships

As we as individuals mature and engage in more complex and diverse social interactions, we experiment with various possible selves and shape our identity based on how we experience

ourselves in different social environments (Erikson, 1968). In as much as media are an important part of our social environment, media exposure and mediated interactions are important to shaping our identity, as well as to helping us maintain and reinforce preferred social identities in the face of competing influences and environmental threats (Slater, 2007, 2015).

Furthermore, the proliferation of social media has made media technologies and platforms more central to social interaction. Even communication between close family members and friends are now often mediated, and public interactions also generally take place through our phones, computers, social networks, and other platforms. Our increasing exposure to information via the internet exposes us to a plethora of new ideas, new behaviors, and new fashions. Such information serves as social cues that help form and manage our social identity. For example, rather than having to imagine how friends, family, and peers will react to a new look, behavior, or attitude, we can now post a story or selfie online and get immediate responses from a wide array of social contacts. Thus, the social interactions that inform our identity are wider-ranging, more frequent, and more immediate than they once were, making mediated experience a more central influence on our self and identity.

One way that media play a role in shaping our identity is in allowing us to interact with media characters. Such interactions and relationships with characters can help shape identity by providing opportunities for social comparison (e.g., Nabi & Keblusek, 2014). Social comparisons help people understand who they are relative to others in terms of important attributes (e.g., looks, status, and achievements) and thus shape their sense of actual self, possible self, and ideal self. A second way media may affect identity is through identification, whereby audiences often take on the identity of characters and come to see things through the perspective of characters. Identifying with characters allows readers and viewers to experience themselves in roles they would not otherwise experience. Third, media also provide audiences with opportunities to vicariously learn ideas, behaviors, and attitudes that become part of their identity (e.g., Slater & Hayes, 2010). Finally, media characters may also serve as imaginary or parasocial interaction partners whose imagined responses may shape the self (e.g., Papa et al., 2000; Slater, Ewoldsen, & Woods, 2017).

Perhaps the most obvious way that media characters impact our sense of self is through modeling and imitation (Bandura, 2009; see also Chapter 7 of this volume). Because humans are able to learn symbolically, media characters present a wide variety of learning opportunities. In particular, viewers can observe mediated characters model attitudes and behaviors, including how to enact these behaviors skillfully and effectively; viewers can also observe these characters rewarded (Bandura, 2009). Learning through observation of vicarious rewards is central to social learning. When the model is reasonably similar to the observer, such observation is likely to increase the observer's self-efficacy or belief that they, too, are capable of enacting the behavior (Bandura, 2009).

But media not only provide us with models or information that shape our identity; they also are venues for expression of social identity. Writing fan fiction, being active followers of fan Facebook pages, or following celebrities on Twitter are ways to express aspects of identity and membership in communities of interest. Yet another way media can be used to express identity is through media choice (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010). For example, audience members in the U.S. may express their political identity by watching the right-leaning Fox News or the left-leaning MSNBC, or their fashion savvy by being avid viewers of *Project Runway*. Finally, participatory media such as social networks where people can post content that expresses some part of their identity, or comment sections where people can express themselves, provide opportunities for

people to express themselves and receive feedback from others. In these and other ways, media platforms serve both as sources of information and feedback that is relevant to developing and maintaining identity, and provide a means of expressing or confirming one's social identities.

Social Comparison

An important way that media exposure affects the self is by providing ample, and constantly novel, opportunities for social comparison. Perhaps the most researched topic in terms of media effects on the self relates to body image. Grabe, Ward, and Hyde (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of research on media effects on self-objectification, preoccupation with the body, internalization of thin ideals, and eating behaviors related to body image. The strongest effects of media exposure were found on internalization of thin ideals or the adoption of socio-cultural appearance ideals as a personal goal and standard. This suggests that the effects of media on the goals we set for ourselves, and how we judge ourselves in light of those goals, are strong relative to effects on behaviors or attitudes.

Studies with a focus on social media consistently show a positive relationship between global social media use (e.g., time spent) and the internalization of a thin body ideal, as indicated by a recent meta-analysis (Mingoia, Hutchinson, Wilson, & Gleaves, 2017; the average association amounted to $r = .18$ [.12; .23]). With respect to the processes potentially underlying this relationship, Vogel, Rose, Roberts, and Eckles (2014) found that frequent Facebook use was related to lower self-esteem and that exposure to others' Facebook profiles that instigated upward social comparisons lowered state self-esteem, whereas profiles containing downward social comparisons did not.

Two other recent meta-analyses summarized the evidence of cross-sectional studies on the relationship between global social media use (e.g., time spent or log-in frequency) and self-esteem. Both meta-analyses identified a significant-though-small negative relationship (Huang, 2017: $r = -.04$ [-.08; -.00]; Liu & Baumeister, 2016: $r = -.09$ [-.14; -.03]). Thus, it seems that using social media can be both a source of self-affirmation (e.g., Toma & Hancock, 2013) and a source of upward social comparison yielding lowered self-esteem. As a case in point, correlational studies suggest that intention to blog is related to greater psychological distress (Baker & Moore, 2008), whereas actual blogging is related to increased perceived well-being. This seeming contradiction points to the possibility that passive engagement in social media may have deleterious effects on the self, whereas more active participation (e.g., posting) may have positive effects (Verduyn et al., 2015).

In sum, research suggests that both traditional mass media exposure as well as engagement with social media serve as opportunities to learn about and reflect on ourselves, experiment with our identities, and express ourselves in various ways. What content we are exposed to and create and how we use media may be critical in determining whether such effects will be positive or negative. What is perhaps less clear—and a question to be explored in the coming years—is whether and how traditional social connections differ from various mediated platforms as forums for the work of forming and maintaining self-identity.

Identification

Identification (Cohen, 2001) refers to an imaginative process that includes, among other dimensions, taking the perspective of a narrative character. This, however, does not necessarily mean

that one fully loses oneself in the experience of being the character. Rather, identification is a merging of the character and audience member's self rather than a replacing of the audience's self with that of the character. For example, identification may occur in situations where audience members know more or less than a character, but, through identification, audiences are still able to see narrative events, understand them, and experience them through the perspective of the character. Under such conditions, identification may not mean that the perspective is identical to that of the character, but there can still be a deep appreciation for the character's feelings, goals, and understanding. Much like viewing an event through a GoPro camera attached to someone else, audience members are able to gain an intimate understanding of events but at the same time maintain their own sense of self.

Identification is one way that stories mentally transport us out of our immediate environment and into a world inhabited by characters and where the story takes place (Cohen, 2001). When stories are well constructed, narrative characters feel real to us, and we can come to care deeply about what they do and what happens to them. Though perhaps the most obvious question regarding identification is its impact on the way we experience entertainment (e.g., enjoyment and interpretation) and whether it enhances the impact of narratives (e.g., persuasion, behavior), it is also interesting to think about the effects of identifying with a character on how we think and feel about our own selves. It is not hard to imagine that feeling intimately, if vicariously, involved in events that are beyond the scope of our immediate experience can change how we view ourselves and our environment.

Audience members often identify with characters and come to adopt their goals and perspective on events and to empathize with their emotions. Interestingly, people do not necessarily identify more strongly with characters that are demographically similar to them (Cohen, Weimann-Saks, & Mazor-Tregerman, 2017), suggesting that identification is not limited in scope and can be an effective way to explore widely alternative selves. In seeing the world through the eyes of a character, we can gain a better understanding of how others see the world and what they experience. Studies have demonstrated several ways that media characters can impact audience members.

Tal-Or and Tsfati (2016) found that Jewish students who identified with an Arab character had reduced stereotypes about Arabs, more willingness to interact with Arabs, and more positive attitudes about the Arab-Israeli conflict. Similarly, Chung and Slater (2013) found that identification with a drug-addicted single mother in a Hollywood movie decreased social distance with respect to persons with a history of drug addiction. In another study, findings indicated that identifying with a disabled protagonist who tells a story about a job interview with an abled interviewer impacted attitudes about laws regarding employment of disabled people (de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012).

Furthermore, identifying with a character may result in adopting certain traits of characters. For example, Appel (2011) found that participants who were exposed to a "stupid" character in a narrative underperformed on a subsequent exam, suggesting that traits of characters were assimilated into the self. Sestir and Green (2010) provide experimental evidence that identification with a character activates (in the short term) those traits in audience members that are also relevant to the character. Under high-identification conditions, viewers were able to more quickly identify traits that they shared with the character as descriptive of themselves as compared to viewers in a low-identification condition or compared to traits not relevant to the character. This suggests that media characters activate traits in the self that, over time, should strengthen those traits. Identification, then, has the ability to impact identity by allowing us to see things from new perspectives.

As Mar and Oatley (2008) explain, experiencing stories simulates social experiences in our mind. Such simulations help us understand others (Kidd & Castano, 2013) and, through that experience, understand ourselves with greater clarity. Gabriel and her colleagues supported this argument regarding characters that were liked by audiences (e.g., Derrick, Gabriel, & Tippin, 2008; Young, Gabriel, & Sechrist, 2012). These authors found that just thinking about a favorite character was enough to enhance one's self-esteem and satisfaction with one's body image (Young et al., 2012). Taken together, research has shown that identifying with media characters tends to promote the assimilation of characters' traits into the self and impacts our self-perception.

Another way that identification may affect the self is through vicarious experimentation. Because continuity is a key principle of the self (Breakwell, 2010), a significant change in attitudes or behaviors presents a challenge to the self (Murtagh, Gatersleben, & Uzzell, 2012). In other words, changing attitudes or behaviors requires giving up a part of how we see ourselves and adopting a change in our sense of self. And because identity is a system of interrelated perceptions, traits, beliefs, and affiliations, changing a central part of one's identity may threaten one's sense of self more generally. Identifying with characters may allow an audience member to "see myself in a new light" (Kearney & O'Sullivan, 2003, p. 146), which can be a crucial step to behavior change. From the perspective of vicarious experimentation, then, one advantage of identification as a tool for change is that it allows one to imagine alternative selves without the social and psychological risks that are involved in changing a central behavior or attitude. For example, if Jane sees herself as a lazy couch potato who enjoys watching TV and playing video games but starts feeling that she needs to adopt a healthier lifestyle, she may have a hard time imagining herself as someone who would get up early to run. Consequently, she is unlikely to start running on a regular basis. The need to change one's identity (from couch potato to runner) is an important obstacle to behavior change. Identifying with a runner character in a movie may help Jane imagine herself as a runner and thus make it more likely that she will try running.

Furthermore, because identity is social and we tend to surround ourselves with similar others, changing one's identity also requires a social adjustment. Jane may need to distance herself somewhat from her TV-watching friends and meet some new runner friends if she is to become a runner for the long term. Indeed, the recent popularity of running groups suggests that social support is important to help integrate running into runners' identity (Stevens et al., 2017). Similarly, Falomir and Invernizzi (1999) found that smoker identity was an important predictor of intention to quit smoking and of resistance to anti-smoking messages, even among adolescents who had not smoked for very long. Thus, a significant change of behavior may require an adjustment of both one's personal identity and of one's social networks. Identification with a character that embodies this new identity may help facilitate the process of change, since one can vicariously experience a supportive social network that may ease the transition to a new or expanded social network. Similarly, participating in social networks online, via blogs, groups, or following people on Twitter may all provide a way to experiment with alternative social identities consistent with new patterns of behavior.

Importantly, this notion of vicarious experimentation is distinct from, though related to, social learning. Social learning, as discussed previously, involves observing reinforcements experienced by a model and learning from that observed reinforcement. Identification processes suggest that one actually "tries on" (or vicariously experiences) reinforcements, including, in some cases, being part of a supportive social network. Rather than learning new behaviors and

attitudes through observation, vicarious experimentation focuses on the importance of imaging and trying on new identities related to new behaviors.

Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships refer to imagined relationships and a sense of intimacy that audiences develop with media personae through repeated exposure and imagined interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Since the social groups we belong to compose a crucial part of our identity, and our friends serve as an important source of feedback that shapes our identity, it is likely that favorite television shows and characters serve an important role in identity formation and maintenance. It also makes sense that the less one feels part of social groups (e.g., work, friends), the more television plays a central role with respect to self and identity. Derrick et al. (2008) found that thinking of a parasocial relationship partner improved self-esteem among low-self-esteem adults. They found that participants tended to develop parasocial relationships with characters who were close to their ideal selves (rather than their actual selves) and that being reminded of these characters made them feel closer to their own ideal selves. Derrick, Gabriel, and Hugenberg (2009) also found that thinking of favorite television programs served to inhibit drops in self-esteem and negative feelings among lonely people or people who feel a need to belong.

A recent development in the study of parasocial relationships is the focus on retrospective imaginative involvement (RII; Slater et al., 2017). For the most part, the study of parasocial relationships has focused on how these relationships play out during exposure to media content (i.e., parasocial experience, see Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011) or on the overall attachment to personae and the effects of these relationships. However, the psychological processes that determine the impact of media content are not limited to the duration of exposure. As Slater and colleagues (2017) note, we often think about books, films, or TV shows for a long time after we finish reading or watching them; we hum the soundtrack, discuss the content with friends, and post about it on our social media. After exposure, we may continue to imaginatively engage with a story or a character. For example, we may imagine characters in other situations or making other decisions than those they made in the narrative, or we may imagine ourselves as the character. Such retrospective imaginative involvement in media content is likely to have long-term impact on identity, as these imaginative relationships may influence our perceived social group membership, desirable personal and social attributes, and our personal values. Exploration of such effects is ripe for further empirical exploration.

Temporarily Expanded Boundaries of the Self: Narratives and the Limitations of Personal and Social Identity

We have described many ways in which development and reinforcement of social identity intersect with media use. Now, we examine a related but distinct aspect of the identity–media relationship: how media content—notably narrative content—may provide a means for managing the inherent stresses and demands of identity maintenance.

Demands and Constraints of Individual Identity

Maintaining the combination of personal qualities and social roles we call one's identity is a lot of work, taxing people both cognitively and emotionally (e.g., Preston & Wegner, 2005). Various

aspects of personal and social identity, both actual and aspirational, can be in conflict (Higgins, 1989; Marks & MacDermid, 1996). People employ a variety of strategies to protect self-concept, including attributing success to intrinsic and failure to extrinsic factors, and maintaining sometimes unrealistic optimism about personal outcomes (e.g., Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Cooper, 2007; Weinstein, 1980). Much of our ongoing mental activity, including daydreaming and other forms of ruminative thought, serves to sustain—for better or for worse—key elements of our self-concept (Martin & Tesser, 1989).

Moreover, there are good reasons for suggesting that being an individual self is not only demanding but is also constraining of and frustrating to fundamental needs (see Slater, Johnson, Cohen, Comello, & Ewoldsen, 2014, for a more detailed discussion). James (1890/1981; see also Comello, 2009) points out that in becoming who we are socially and personally, we forego many of the other possible selves we might have been, perhaps leading to some sense of regret and loss.

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1990) proposed that people have inherent needs for competence and agency, choice and autonomy, and connectedness to and affiliation with others. If we as human beings have these inherent needs, they can only be imperfectly satisfied. Often enough, one may be frustrated with what one can do, with one's freedom of choice, or with one's social and personal relationships. Even if each of these goes as well as can be hoped in life, as James (1890/1981) suggests, one set of competencies precludes developing others; one set of relationships may displace other possible relationships. However autonomous and free one believes oneself to be, one has little choice about the inherent capacities of one's body and mind, limited choices about where one lives one's life, and even less choice about when in history one lives.

People have many ways of temporarily experiencing freedom from some of the inherent limitations of individual selfhood. Alcohol and drugs may provide a temporary and illusory sense of expanded capacity or diminish the perceptual boundaries of self and other. Ideology and religion may permit a sense of merging of self with a group and surrender to a set of overarching values. Artistic expression and aesthetic experience have a quality that transcends the typical concerns of individual life. Mysticism and spirituality have, as their explicit objective, merger of the subjective experience of individuality with universality (Huxley, 1945; James, 1911). We argue that stories, too, help meet, at least temporarily, this deep human yearning to step beyond the constraints of the individual self.¹

Stories and Expanded Boundaries of the Self

The Temporarily Expanded Boundaries of the Self or TEBOTS model (Slater et al., 2014) proposes that one of the inherent appeals of stories to human beings is the temporary expansion of the subjective experience of the self that results from immersion in stories. One way to understand this idea is to consider the distinction that William James makes between the *I* and the *me* (see Comello, 2009 for a more extended discussion). The *me* is our constructed set of social and personal identities: profession, gender, religion, family roles, skills, and so on. The *I* is our ontological self, our experience of being itself, which precedes these roles and identities.

TEBOTS suggests that, when immersed in a story, we maintain our ontological experience of *I*, while our *me* is temporarily supplanted (or at least supplemented) by the personal and social roles of those we identify with in the story (Cohen, 2001). In that way, our subjective experience of our capacities, competence, and agency can be expanded to incorporate the magic of

a Harry Potter or Hermione Granger, the powers of a superhero, or the agonizing limitations on freedoms, capacities, and relationships of a slave in the antebellum American south. Stories provide not only an expanded experience of agency or lack thereof but freedom from limitation to any given social role or circumstance, time, or place. Similarly, we may have in this imaginative world friendships, intimate relationships, or enmities with an endless variety of persons with whom we have parasocial or imaginative interactions or relationships (Annese, 2004; Giles, 2002; Slater et al., 2017).

Several key hypotheses have been derived from the TEBOTS model and tested empirically. Social identity theory (Turner, 1987) highlights the way outgroup members are seen as less differentiated and less fully human than ingroup members. Therefore, identification with an erstwhile outgroup member in a narrative should increase differentiation and experience of the humanness of that stigmatized other. This in turn, the TEBOTS model suggests, should reduce social distance. This hypothesis was supported in an experiment in which a movie protagonist, a single mother, was manipulated to be a drug addict in one condition but not in the other (Chung & Slater, 2013).

Another hypothesis is that when one's social or personal self is under threat or stress, stories should be enjoyed more, as expansion of the boundaries of self should be particularly desirable, regardless of how positive or negative the story is (so that effects are not attributable to mood management; see Knobloch, 2003; Zillmann, 2000). Johnson, Ewoldsen, and Slater (2015) manipulated stress through a self-control depletion manipulation. As predicted, in the self-control depletion condition, stories were enjoyed more regardless of positive or negative story valence. The inverse of this hypothesis was also tested, suggesting that persons whose sense of personal identity is enhanced should enjoy stories less. Johnson, Slater, Silver, and Ewoldsen (2016) used an affirmation manipulation to increase positive self-concept. Again, the hypothesis was supported: Those in the affirmation condition reported less enjoyment of the stories, again regardless of story valence.

The Self, Identity, and Eudaimonia: Mediated Wisdom of Experience

The TEBOTS model is explicitly about the attraction of stories, as long as the story is capable of inducing immersion and engagement with story characters. TEBOTS does not address the possible impacts of stories and possible differential effects of distinct types of stories. In particular, the possibility that eudaimonic stories—stories that are deeply moving and touch upon key elements of human experience (Oliver & Bartsch, 2011; Oliver & Raney, 2011; see also Chapter 17 in this volume)—may have some kind of significant impact on audience members is especially tantalizing.

Two of the authors of this chapter, along with one of this book's co-editors, Mary Beth Oliver, have explored this possibility. Socio-emotional selectivity theory (SST; Carstensen, 2006) suggests that people grow in terms of what they value and their willingness to plan for the future as they age. Experience brings awareness of the finiteness of the lifespan and one's closeness to one's future self; even among younger people, poignant transitions such as graduation can have a similar effect (Ersner-Hershfield, 2009).

The Mediated Wisdom of Experience perspective (MWOE: Slater, Oliver, & Appel, 2016; Slater, Oliver, Appel, Tchernev, & Silver, 2018) argues that eudaimonic narratives in particular should operate similarly on their audiences. To view or read a eudaimonic narrative, typically, is to vicariously experience change, loss, the preciousness and fragility of life and relationships, and the inevitable movement of the lifespan. In other words, as a reader or viewer, one

experiences some taste of these verities of life without a full lifetime of personal experience. In fact, the framing of the eudaimonic narrative is likely to emphasize the potential meaning and purpose of life in a way that may or may not happen in the lived circumstances of a given lifetime.

This model was tested first using four short paired videos, each pair of different genres but similar topics and production approach (ads, news stories, etc.), selected to be high or low in eudaimonic qualities (Slater et al., 2016). The primary dependent variable of interest was delay discounting. Delay discounting (Kirby & Maraković, 1996) is typically viewed as a dispositional variable representing the additional reward someone requires to postpone a benefit. A typical item might ask, “Would you prefer receiving \$55 right now or \$60 in two weeks?” As predicted, the eudaimonic video clips decreased delay discounting—that is, people were more willing to accept delayed rewards. Also as predicted, this effect was in part mediated by poignancy—the extent to which the audience members experienced mixed happiness and sadness, a mixed emotion believed to be associated with perception of life’s complexity—in response to the video clips.

A subsequent study (Slater et al., 2018) extended these findings by using tighter and more ecologically valid experimental manipulations, testing a mediator (closeness to future self) more directly associated with SST, and adding a dependent variable, acceptance of the prospect of death, as a way to assess impact on maturity of responses and to develop findings that suggested eudaimonic videos could buffer the effects of mortality salience (Rieger et al., 2015). Three Hollywood movies were edited to show scenes higher in eudaimonic content versus more action-oriented scenes from the same movie that were less clearly eudaimonic. Again, the eudaimonic versions of the videos increased willingness to accept delayed rewards (i.e., reduced delay discounting) and, extending the Rieger et al. (2015) findings, increased self-reported death acceptance. Poignancy in this case did not significantly mediate these effects. However, a measure of closeness to future self did serve as such a mediator, consistent with a socio-emotional selectivity theory perspective.

Finally, it may be useful to further distinguish the TEBOTS and MWOE theoretical domains. TEBOTS focuses on the drive to expand the possibilities of our experiences of social and personal identity. In contrast, MWOE suggests that in eudaimonic stories there is typically recognition that the many things we value about *me*, our social and personal identities—love of family members, our capacities, etc.—are transient and are lost in the course of time. But in the recognition of their transience, there may also be, at least implicitly, an experience of the *I* that persists apart from these social and personal identities. This *I* may grow and deepen in understanding and appreciation of what life is, and in acceptance of the passage of time and the inevitabilities that passage brings. The impact of eudaimonic narratives on the salience of the experience of *I* apart from transient social identities, and whether this impact may be the result of certain types of eudaimonic narratives, are promising prospects for future research.

Summary and Conclusion

Looking back over the foregoing chapter, it is evident that identity plays a role in each phase of the media-effects process. Our identity can be thought of as an independent variable affecting how we interact with media, including what media we select and attend to and how we interpret what we encounter. Social and personal identity variables can moderate how media exposures affect attitudes and behaviors, and can also serve as dependent or mediating variables. We argue there are few things more important to a human being

than their personal and social identity. To the extent that media may influence one's experience of identity, this area of research represents a media-effects question of fundamental interest. As the way people define their personal and social identity profoundly influences their behavior (consider a jihadi, for example), these processes are also of significant social concern.

In this chapter, we have reviewed concepts and theories of self and identity insofar as they bear on mediated experience. In particular, we reviewed how the boundaries of identity are blurred at least temporarily, and potentially reshaped, by mediated experiences such as identification or parasocial relationships with persons portrayed in media or via choice of social networks in social media. In so doing, we highlighted ways in which the experience of personal and social identity can be at least temporarily malleable, and thus perhaps subject to evolution and change, for better or for worse.

In sum, the experiences of the self are the most intimate dimensions of each person's experience and provide the filters through which life is experienced; few things are more important to explore than how we come to understand and experience ourselves. As media scholars, it is important that we consider the various roles media play in shaping the various dimensions of the self and how these effects are, in turn, implicated in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Media research that focuses on the self is likely to become even more central as research evolves from a mass media model to a model in which the individual is more central as both producer and consumer, in which social networks exist via the media and in which presentation of self and identity is executed largely via the media. The study of media and the self thus promises to be a fruitful avenue for continued scholarship. We hope this chapter, by considering some fundamental issues regarding the nature of self and identity while attending to media content (particularly narrative content), serves as a useful foundation for such future research.

Note

- 1 This argument may be new to the social science literature but it goes back historically. Abhivanagupta, the 10th century Indian mystic, philosopher, and aesthetic theorist, suggested that the love of drama has its roots in the momentary freedom audience members gain from the experience of their own limited, egoic self (Mishra, 2006).

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