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Linking Political TV Shows with Female Lead Characters to Political Engagement: The Roles of Parasocial Processes and Gender Identity

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ABSTRACT

This study tests the relationship between viewing political TV shows with female lead characters and political engagement. It argues that parasocial processes provide the necessary link and gender identity is a critical moderating variable. Results of an in-lab experiment show that viewing a female lead character in a politically-driven plotline increases political self-efficacy, interest, and participation among individuals who identify as more feminine, and this effect is mediated by parasocial interactions with that character. Coupled with prior research, these results demonstrate that more feminine individuals may become more politically engaged through parasocial interactions and relationships with fictional female political leaders.

Political dramas have become a mainstay of modern television. The popularity of these TV shows has included a slight uptick in the historically low number that feature female lead characters (Justin, 2019). However, despite the increased presence of female leads in political television, the role that women play is often presented with caveats. For example, female presidents are most often shown as centrists or Republicans, and female politicians are seldom shown being elected to their position of power based solely on their merits (Elavia, 2015). In addition to this conditional representation of fictional female political leaders on TV, there are persistent gender-based differences in public perceptions of women politicians (Pew Research Center, 2015). In response, scholars have attempted to tease apart the role

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that media play in shaping and reinforcing such gender-based effects of the representations of women in political power (e.g., Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006; Sink & Mastro, 2017).

This study builds upon previous research linking the viewing of political dramas featuring female lead characters to political engagement by experimentally testing this relationship, using parasocial interaction and gender identity as the fundamental mechanisms at play (Hoewe & Sherrill, 2019). A focus on TV viewers' gender identity, in particular, helps establish a greater understanding of the implications of the increased presence of women in non-stereotypical roles onscreen. Central to this argument is the dynamic nature of gender among media consumers and the role that their gender identity plays in important political outcomes, including political self-efficacy, interest, and participation. Considering that perceptions of women leaders often differ by gender (Fox & Lawless, 2011) and gender differences exit in political self-efficacy and participation (Gidengil et al., 2008), this study investigates the influence of TV representations of politically powerful women on viewers' political outcomes via parasocial interaction with the character. Parasocial processes, including parasocial interaction and relationships, represent the connections that audience members develop with media characters, which can include both short- and long-term relationships and effects (Dibble et al., 2016). This study identifies gender identity as the important moderating variable and parasocial interaction as the crucial mediating variable of political television consumption and its effects on viewers' future political engagement.

Women in Political TV

Given that prior research has found representations of fictional worlds relevant to perceptions of political reality (Holbert et al., 2014), scholars have continued to explore how women and other marginalized groups are represented on TV. Skewed representations of women, which amount to the "aggregate image of conventionality, tradition, and status quo," can reinforce traditional gender roles and sexist attitudes (Signorielli, 1989, p. 358). Women make up only 39.6% of all TV characters (Sink & Mastro, 2017) and are typically portrayed in stereotypical roles – as wives, mothers, love interests, and sexual conquests who most often work in "feminine" occupations (e.g., nurses and teachers; Lotz, 2006; Sink & Mastro, 2017). The prevalence of these stereotypical roles is consequential, adding to the beliefs and values that viewers hold about gender and gender roles (Lauzen et al., 2008).

Despite the scarcity of non-stereotypical representations of women on TV, there has been a small push to create more politically-driven shows with female lead characters. Popular series like *The Good Wife, Scandal, Madam Secretary*, and *The Good Fight* have become successful across demographic

categories and feature strong female characters working in politics, making it important to understand the effect that these non-stereotypical representations may have on audiences. Initial evidence shows that viewing of such programming can facilitate the experience of transportation and the development of parasocial relationships with the female lead characters in political shows, and these parasocial relationships are related to increases in political interest, self-efficacy, and participation among loyal viewers (Hoewe & Sherrill, 2019). Additional research is necessary to understand the causal mechanisms at play as well as the potential impact of viewers' individual differences on these relationships.

Gender Identity and Parasocial Processes

Gender identity is one of the most salient facets of one's self-concept, and it affects all aspects of human communication (Chen, 2016). Gender identity is both an individual and social construct. It is largely dependent on cultural norms and values, and the way that different cultures define masculinity, femininity, and non-binary gender expressions can vary (Chen, 2016). In the United States, femininity is often associated with being passive, nurturing, and deferential, whereas masculinity is associated with dominance, strength, and directness (Thomas, 2008). However, individual expressions of gender may conform to or subvert cultural gender norms; for instance, women may construct an individualized femininity that is strong, mature, and independent, thus subverting gender norms (Thomas, 2008).

Individuals' gender identities and the representations of gender to which they are exposed in media content – not only impact their self-conceptualization – but also their mediated experiences. As part of these phenomena, parasocial processes consider the bond that an audience member feels with a media character (Dibble et al., 2016). Parasocial processes can include parasocial interaction, which occurs during the actual consumption of media content (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011), and parasocial relationships, which are a longer-term effect that can develop during media consumption but persist beyond the actual consumption event (Dibble et al., 2016). In their development of a measure of parasocial interaction, Schramm and Hartmann (2008) posited that an initial parasocial interaction sequence between a viewer and a media character "is able to constitute a PSR," and parasocial relationships are "able to influence future motivations and selection processes as well as PSI in subsequent media exposure sequences" (p. 386). Prior research has illustrated the long-term effects of viewing political dramas with lead female characters through parasocial relationships (Hoewe & Sherrill, 2019); the present research tests the short-term effects of parasocial interaction. The parasocial interactions examined here are mediated experiences where the communication process is one-sided, occurs during media consumption, and

involves interacting psychologically with a media character, which can include cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008).

Parasocial processes – both interactions and relationships – often develop and are expressed similarly to the dynamics traditionally observed in interpersonal relationships (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). Particularly with media characters where there is no possibility of a mutual relationship, media consumers are inclined to use the same judgments of media characters as they would in real life (Bond & Drogos, 2014). Importantly, gender similarities between an individual and a media character can lead to a desire to become like the media character, suggesting that gender congruence may impact parasocial processes (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Also, much like interpersonal relationships, adult men and women often form different types of parasocial relationships with media characters, and women tend to have stronger parasocial relationships than men (Cohen, 1997). As such, media consumers' gender identity may impact the nature of their parasocial interactions with TV characters.

One of the TV shows included in this experimental study features a female lead character in a position of political power (i.e., a non-stereotypical role). The historic scarcity of women in roles of political leadership on TV makes such characters more meaningful, particularly to viewers with more feminine gender identity who can see themselves reflected in her, creating the potential for strong parasocial interactions and, eventually, relationships. To contextualize the effect of a female lead character in a politically-driven plotline of a TV drama, male lead characters and family-driven plotlines also will be considered in this study. As such, in comparison with a male lead, a female lead may bring about stronger reactions among participants with greater levels of feminine gender identity, due to a shared social identity. Coupling this with a comparison between a political situation and a family situation being dealt with by the lead character will give an indication if participants with feminine gender identity respond more strongly to women in non-stereotypical roles. Whereas seeing a woman dealing with a family issue or a man dealing with a political issue conforms to gender stereotypes, viewing a non-stereotypical situation of a women solving a political crisis may bring about a different response.

These particular situations were selected based on the stereotypical lenses through which male and female political actors are often considered. Gender affinity theory posits that political candidates, in particular, may be evaluated differently solely based on their gender. Female candidates, when compared to male candidates, are often considered better at dealing with issues related to compassion and women's rights and worse at dealing with issues that require directness and aggression (Sanbonmatsu, 2002). Also, gender-based stereotyping of political figures tends to assume that women are more conducive to addressing issues of poverty and education (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). In

this way, female political figures are often perceived as lacking the "agentic" characteristics considered necessary for politics, including being forceful and ambitious (Eagly & Karau, 2002). It follows then that the inclusion of a woman as a viable political actor, perhaps even in a fictionalized form, can be formative and positive among audiences (Lawless, 2004). Thus, given the implications of this character as a potential role model in this cultural context, this study anticipates that more feminine individuals will gain inspiration from her and parasocially interact with her.

H1: Participants with greater levels of feminine gender identity who view a female lead character in a politically-driven plotline will experience greater levels of parasocial interaction with that lead character, compared to those who view a male lead character and/or a family-driven plotline.

Connections with Political Engagement

Prior research has shown that women often have lower levels of political participation and efficaciousness than men, potentially due to feelings of inadequacy in their ability to understand political nuance (Gidengil et al., 2008). With the exception of voting, women often choose to "opt-out" of political activities – ranging from discussions of politics with peers to running for office – even compared to men of similar status and qualifications (Lawless & Fox, 2010). More specifically, even when their credentials, backgrounds, and experiences were similar, "highly accomplished women from both major political parties are substantially less likely than similarly situated men to perceive themselves as qualified to seek elective office" (Fox & Lawless, 2011, p. 61).

Despite women making advances in employment and education, they may be held back from participating in politics due to lingering perceptions of politics as a masculine space (Gidengil et al., 2008). Moreover, some scholarship has connected female participants performing comparatively poorly – in areas as diverse as leadership, occupational proficiency, and political knowledge tests – with the experience of stereotype threat (e.g., Hoyt & Murphy, 2016; McGlone et al., 2006). Stereotype threat is the idea that stereotypes undermine performance by creating concern among members of the stereotyped group, such that the performance itself might confirm the negative expectations that others might hold about them. It is probable that stereotype threat contributes to the negative perceptions that some women have of their participation in politics. This leaves open the possibility that media content could combat the impact of stereotype threat by depicting women in positions of political leadership, negating the effects of stereotypical portrayals of women.

Parasocial processes involving TV characters in politically-themed shows may provide ways for viewers to see and feel connected to women who succeed in positions of power. Prior research has proposed that the presence of strong female political role models in young women's lives may weaken the self-perception barriers limiting their political engagement (e.g., Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). Female role models perceived as more "visible" in politics were connected to adolescent girls' increased expectations of political participation later in life, lending credence to a "role model effect" through which adolescent girls see evidence that politics is a suitable setting for women as well as men (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006, p. 243–244). This finding supports the possibility that younger female viewers of a politically-oriented program like *Madam Secretary*, which presents a woman in a position of political power, may experience similar boosts to their anticipated political involvement through a role model effect. Hoewe and Sherrill (2019) found this effect was possible for regular viewers of female-led political dramas, who in their sample were mostly women (71%) and the average age was 31. The current study moves this idea a step forward by testing these predictions among younger individuals who have little prior viewing experience with these shows.

As such, the next set of hypotheses explores the relationships between political TV viewing and downstream political engagement, where parasocial interactions with female lead characters in political TV shows may increase levels of political self-efficacy, interest, and participation. Consumption of political television has been linked to increased levels of political engagement through several variables, including political information seeking, having a say in what the government does, attending a political event, and voting (Groshek & Krongard, 2016; Hoewe & Sherrill, 2019). Moreover, consumers of political entertainment live in a "culture of political engagement," where political interest, efficacy, and participation are all parts of the entertainment experience (Jones, 2006, p. 378). This study will determine whether future political engagement can be increased through parasocial interactions with political TV characters.

H2: Participants who experience greater levels of parasocial interaction with the lead character in a political TV show will express a greater likelihood of future **a)** political self-efficacy, **b)** political interest, and **c)** political participation.

Figure 1 illustrates a simplified version of the model of moderated mediation that will be tested. (It does not include the lower-order effects that are tested within the model.)

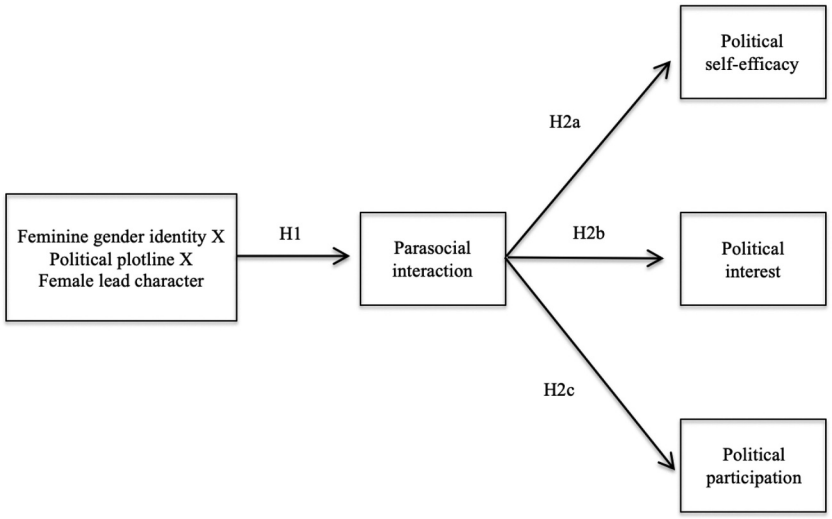

Figure 1. Hypothesized model.

Method

This study experimentally tests the effects of viewing political TV shows with female (and male) lead characters. To do so, it uses two political TV dramas (*Madam Secretary* and *Designated Survivor*) to examine the potential differences among viewers of these lead characters. In addition, the study distinguishes between the political- and family-based plotlines that the lead character is addressing. In that regard, this experiment considers what mechanisms are at play in bringing about parasocial interactions with political TV characters as well as any downstream effects on political engagement.

Participants

Undergraduate students in political science and communication classes were recruited from a large Midwestern university and offered extra credit for their participation in this study. A total of 243 participants completed the study. Of those, 56% identified as women and 42.8% identified as men. Their ages ranged from 18 to 34 (M = 20.31, SD = 2.01). Additionally, participants were asked to identify their race/ethnicity (selecting as many options as applied); 65.0% reported being White or Caucasian, 26.7% as Asian or Pacific Islander, 7.4% as Hispanic, 4.9% as African American or Black, 0.8% as Native American, and 2.1% indicated some other category. Only 42 participants (17.3% of the sample) reported having previously viewed either *Madam Secretary* or *Designated Survivor*.

Procedure

Participants completed the study in an on-campus research lab. They were seated at individual computers separated by partitions. Each computer screen was the same size, and each participant wore headphones while viewing the stimulus video. After completing the consent form, participants watched a clip from one of the shows, which was randomly assigned. The next page of the study asked participants to write what they thought about the show they watched. They then completed questions related to the following variables in this order: parasocial interaction, political self-efficacy, political interest, and political participation. The study concluded with a series of manipulation checks and demographic questions.

Stimuli

The experiment followed a 2 × 2 design, where the manipulations were the gender of the lead character (male or female) and the type of situation that the lead character was addressing (family or political). This resulted in four conditions: 1) female lead character solving a political problem (N = 71); 2) female lead character solving a family problem (N = 54); 3) male lead character solving a political problem (N = 56); and 4) male lead character solving a family problem (N = 62). These situations were chosen to illuminate the impact of the lead character's gender while manipulating their role in the show in stereotypical and non-stereotypical ways.

Clips from episodes of the shows *Madam Secretary* and *Designated Survivor* were used as the stimuli in this study. These shows were selected for several reasons. First, both are political shows that feature a clear primary character. Second, both shows had large viewing audiences and aired on network television. Third, both feature lead characters who are of the same relative age and have a similar character backstory. The clips used were edited versions of episodes of each show. The editing process involved removing longer-running and unrelated storylines and adding transitional fades between scenes. Each clip was between 11 minutes 20 seconds and 12 minutes 24 seconds in length. The episodes were chosen due to their similarities in story content. For the politically-driven conditions, both the *Madam Secretary* (season 1, episode 6) and *Designated Survivor* (season 1, episode 14) clips showed the lead character preventing genocide in a fictional African nation. In both episodes, the lead character had to solve problems arising in his/her attempt to prevent genocide, and both characters were successful in doing so. For the family-driven conditions, the clip from each show involved the lead character determining if his/her spouse had cheated on him/her. Both the *Madam Secretary* clip (season 1, episode 7) and the *Designated Survivor*

clip (season 1, episodes 7 and 8) showed the lead character working through a situation that involved his/her children, a potentially cheating spouse, and/or the paternity of a child. In both cases, the spouse did not cheat, and the lead character was able to resolve the family drama that occurred.

Mediating and Dependent Variables

To address this study's mediating variable, participants were asked to respond to questions about their parasocial interactions with the lead character in a show. They were instructed to "consider the main character of the show you just watched and rate how much you agree with each of the following statements." An adapted version of Schramm and Hartmann's (2008) measure of parasocial interaction (the PSI-Process Scales) was used, which includes items like "I became aware of aspects of the main character that I really liked or disliked" and "I kept asking myself how things would evolve around the main character." This nine-item measure, which included the perceptual-cognitive and affective items of the PSI-Process Scales, used a seven-point scale (1 *Strongly disagree* to 7 *Strongly agree*) to assess responses, and items were presented in random order (M = 4.74, SD = 0.83, α =.73).

The next set of measures asked participants about their own future political engagement, which represent the dependent variables. First, they answered four questions about their political self-efficacy (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010), where each randomly presented question used a seven-point scale (1 *Strongly Disagree* to 7 *Strongly Agree*). This measure included items such as "I can make a difference if I participate in the election process" and "I have a real say in what the government does" (M = 5.08, SD = 1.12, α = .83). Second, participants answered two questions about their interest in politics (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011), which also used a seven-point scale (1 *Strongly Disagree* to 7 *Strongly Agree*). Participants were asked if "in the future" they planned to closely follow news and information about 1) government and public affairs as well as 2) elections (M = 5.48, SD = 1.20, r = .77). Third, participants' intentions to become involved in future political activities was measured. Using a seven-point scale (1 *None in the coming month* to 7 *Everyday*), participants were asked if "during the next month" they planned to participate in several online and offline political activities, including "attend a political meeting, rally, or speech" and "subscribe to a political email list" (Bode & Dalrymple, 2016; Campbell & Kwak, 2010). These 15 items were summed to form a measure of intentions to participate in political activities (M = 22.80, SD = 0.81, α = .91). This scale was kurtotic and was transformed for the subsequent analyses by computing the log of the scale, by which the scale then achieved a normal distribution. (The items in each of these scales are available in the Supplemental Materials.)

Moderating Variables

Though many studies have measured gender as a binary variable, where participants are sorted into the categories of *male* and *female* (e.g., ; Huh & Williams, 2010), some scholars have operationalized gender identity as a socially-constructed trait that exists on a continuum of "psychological, social, and interactive characteristics" that is distinct from biological sex (Reeder, 2011, p. 319). Thus, researchers have measured gender identity using spectrum scales of masculine and feminine identification (e.g., Kim & Bresnahan, 1996; Spence & Buckner, 2000) and questionnaires that measure adherence to gender roles (Lee, 2007); other researchers have measured biological sex characteristics specifically using physical and hormonal traits (Lonergan & Weber, 2019). Following this line of research, this study suggests that attentiveness to *masculinity* and *femininity* can offer a unique glimpse into individuals' gender identities. It considers that possibility by testing both discrete and dimensional conceptions of gender identity.

The primary moderating variables in this study are participants' self-identified gender as well as their identification with the labels "feminine" and "masculine." As was previously mentioned, 56% of participants identified as women and 42.8% identified as men (the remaining 1.2% did not provide an answer). Additionally, participants were also asked to "please rate how much you believe the following adjectives describe you" (Spence & Buckner, 2000). Using a seven-point scale (1 *Not at all like me* to 7 *Very much like me*), participants rated themselves in terms of both "feminine" ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 2.03$) and "masculine" ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.97$). Since these are self-reported measures, participants used their own subjective understanding of what is "feminine" or "masculine" to assess their gender identity. Table 1 displays the zero-order correlation matrix for this study's variables. This table also shows that the three measures of gender identity were highly correlated. Given this study's focus on female lead characters and the strong negative correlation between participants' femininity and masculinity, only femininity and gender are addressed in the analyses.

Manipulation and Quality Checks

To ensure that participants understood the videos they watched, they were asked three manipulation check questions. First, participants were asked to identify the gender of the lead character in the show they watched (male or female), and 98.3% of participants answered correctly. Participants were then asked to identify the primary plotline of the show they watched (political or family), and 97.9% answered correctly. Finally, participants were asked to identify the job of the lead character, where eight options were given; 100% of participants correctly answered that the lead character was a political leader.

Table 1. Zero-order correlation matrix.

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Lead character gender[a]	–							
2	Primary plotline[a]	–	–						
3	Participant gender[b]	–	–	–					
4	Participant femininity	.06	−.11	.85***	–				
5	Participant masculinity	−.08	.15*	−.79***	−.84***	–			
6	Parasocial interaction	.02	.09	.01	.02	−.01	–		
7	Political interest	−.02	−.02	−.02	.01	−.03	.22**	–	
8	Political self-efficacy	−.04	−.03	.08	.08	−.10	.13*	.44***	–
9	Political participation	.03	.05	−.03	−.04	.01	.10	.28***	.24***

Note. Values are Pearson's *r* correlation coefficients. $N = 243$

[a] Female character coded as 1, male character as 0; Political problem coded as 1, family problem as 0.

[b] Women coded as 1, men as 0.

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

Also, to establish that the quality of the videos and character development was consistent across conditions, participants were asked five questions related to 1) their enjoyment of video, 2) the quality of video, 3) the likability of main character, 4) the competency of main character, and 5) the quality of decision making shown by main character. A MANOVA testing the relationship between each condition and these five DVs revealed no significant between-subjects effects (see Supplemental Materials for the results of these tests). These quality checks illustrate the overall similarities in the TV show clips created for this study, where the manipulations of interest thus become the most salient features in the videos.

Results

To test this study's hypotheses, a moderated-mediation model was created with the SPSS PROCESS macro (model 12, Hayes, 2013), using 5,000 bootstrapped samples and 95% bias adjusted confidence intervals. The two condition variables as well as the moderating variable formed the three-way interaction. The mediating variable was parasocial interaction, and the dependent variable was either political self-efficacy, political interest, or political participation. In this way, each model illustrates if the lead character's gender and the plotline he/she experienced interacted with participants' gender identity to influence parasocial interaction, which could then impact their future political self-efficacy, interest, and participation.

The three-way interaction that considered participants' level of femininity as the moderating variable was significantly related to parasocial interaction, $b = .21$, $t(232) = 1.98$, $p = .049$. No lower-order effects were found in the model. The conditional effects of the significant three-way interaction are shown in Figure 2. Participants with greater levels of femininity who saw a politically-driven plotline were more likely to develop greater levels of

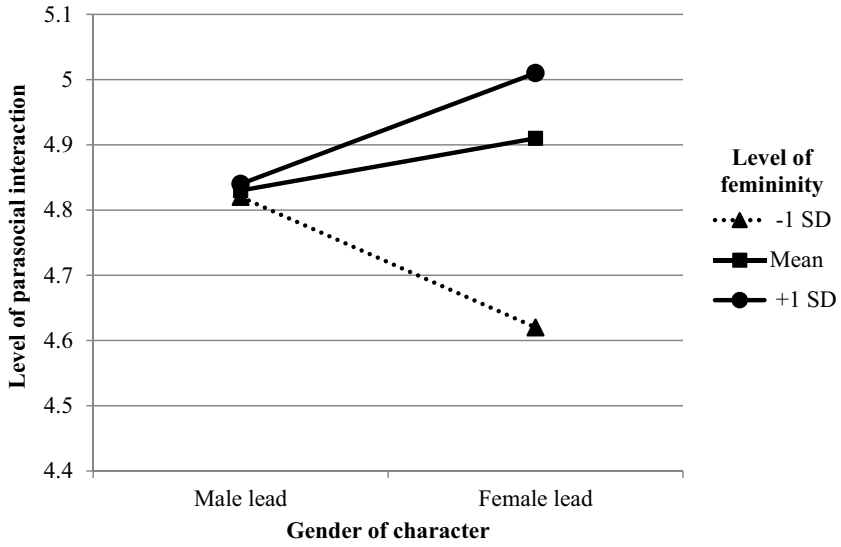

Figure 2. Political plotline.

parasocial interactions with a female lead character. That is, as participants' level of femininity increased to one standard deviation above the mean, these participants reported significantly greater levels of parasocial interaction with the lead character if she was a woman in a show with a political plotline ($b = .46$, $p = .02$). At the mean value of participant femininity, the interaction was not statistically significant at the .05 level ($b = .29$, $p = .07$), and at one standard deviation below the mean, the relationship was no longer statistically significant ($b = -.23$, $p = .30$). There were no significant differences among participants who saw a male lead character in a politically-driven plotline. These results provide support for H1, where higher levels of femininity were related to parasocial interactions with a female lead character in a politically-driven TV show.

Figure 3 shows the results of the three-way interaction when the episode's plotline was driven by a family-based problem. Though participants with low levels of femininity were more likely to report parasocial interaction with lead characters in more stereotypical roles (i.e., greater levels of parasocial interaction with a female lead in a family-based plotline), examining this effect at varying levels of the moderating variable did not reveal any significant relationships.

When this same model was run with participants' gender (i.e., male or female) as the moderating variable, the three-way interaction did not reach traditional levels of statistical significance, $b = .73$, $t(232) = 1.67$, $p = .10$. Though this interaction was not significant, the relationships reported in the previous model were similar (see full results of these tests in Supplemental

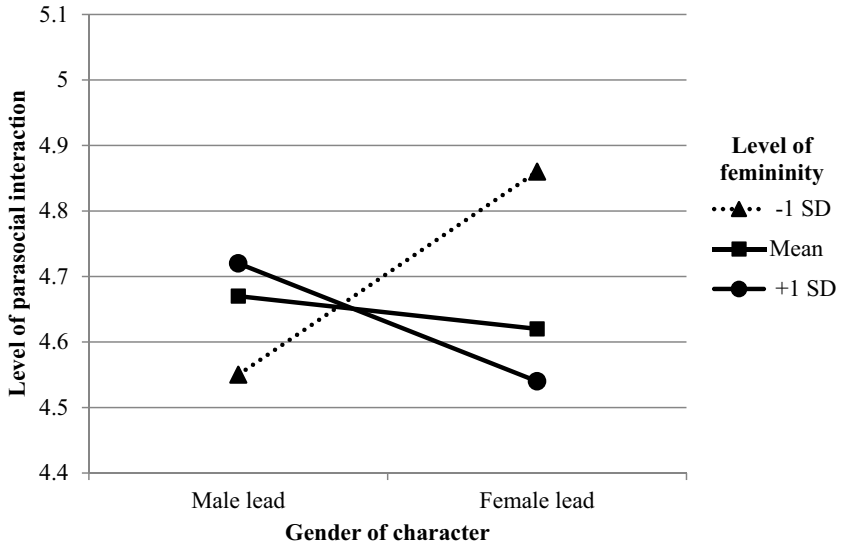

Figure 3. Family plotline.

Materials). That is, the directionality of the relationships was the same, but the relationships were not statistically significant.

These initial results show that participants who reported greater levels of femininity (i.e., greater feminine gender identification) were more likely to engage in parasocial interaction with a female lead character in a politically-driven TV show. Participants with similarly high levels of femininity who watched the same female lead character encounter a family-driven plotline did *not* experience parasocial interactions (as shown in Figure 3). These findings suggest that more feminine TV viewers do not simply engage in parasocial processes with characters who align with their gender identity; instead, they gravitate toward women in non-stereotypical roles – in this case, political leadership. Also, participants' femininity was a more successful moderating variable than was gender, demonstrating the necessity of more sensitive measures of gender identity.

The second portion of this study's moderated-mediation model tested the predictions made in the second hypothesis, which considered whether the level of parasocial interaction between the viewer and the lead character is related to future political self-efficacy, political interest, and political participation (where each dependent variable was tested in a separate model). The direct effect of the three-way interaction (produced by the condition variables and the moderating variable of participants' femininity) was not related to political self-efficacy [$b = -.29$, $t(231) = -1.70$, $p = .09$], political interest [$b = -.15$, $t(231) = -1.04$, $p = .30$], nor political participation [$b = .00$, $t(231) = 0.22$, $p = .83$]. However, all three models indicated indirect effects, where participants scoring high in femininity

who saw a female lead character in a politically-driven plotline showed increases in future political engagement, but only through the mediating variable of parasocial interaction. That is, for participants high in femininity who saw a female lead in a politically-driven plotline, there was a significant indirect effect of the three-way interaction on political self-efficacy through parasocial interaction (b = .10, SE = .07; bootstrapped CI: 0.00–0.26). A similar result emerged for political interest (b = .16, SE = .09; bootstrapped CI: 0.02–-0.37) as well as political participation (b = .01, SE = .01; bootstrapped CI: 0.00–0.03). These results provide support for H2. Specifically, a female lead character in a politically-driven plotline is able to increase political self-efficacy, interest, and participation in individuals with greater feminine identity, through their parasocial interactions with that lead character. In sum, these results provide support for the hypothesized model (visualized in Figure 1).

Helping add context to these quantitative results, several participants with greater levels of femininity wrote about their connections to the lead female character in the video that they watched, specifically when the storyline was based on a political situation. One participant wrote, "I love the dominance of the female lead and I would like to know the name of [the show]." Another wrote that "she is such a great model as a female worker; she made a right, great decision that other males wouldn't do." Still others commented on the "strong female lead," "good strong female characters," and "powerful women moving up into higher places in the government because they deserved and worked for it." These comments help illustrate the impact of even short-term viewing of a show like *Madam Secretary*. Finally, one participant who reported having previously seen *Madam Secretary* commented on the importance of the show: "It is such an empowering and inspiring show. As a woman with a great interest in politics, it has shown me that, one, I'm capable and able to be a leader within this discipline, and two, I bring a special courage that can help others." Taken together, these results show that when viewing a female lead character in a politically-driven TV show, more feminine individuals engage in parasocial interactions with and take inspiration from that lead character, translating it into future political engagement.

Discussion

This study sought to understand the relationship between viewing political TV shows with female lead characters and political engagement, examining parasocial interaction as the mechanism facilitating this process as well as gender identity as a critical individual difference variable to consider. In an extension of prior research that linked viewing of such shows – *Madam Secretary, Scandal*, and *The Good Wife* – to downstream political self-efficacy, interest, and participation (Hoewe & Sherrill, 2019), this study tested the causal mechanisms involved. Using an experiment that incorporated political TV

show content, the results showed the importance of individual differences (in this case, gender identity) on viewing experiences, and the role of parasocial interactions with TV characters in influencing real-world political behavioral intentions. More specifically, watching a politically-driven plotline featuring a woman in the lead role increased political self-efficacy, interest, and participation among participants who identified as more feminine, and this effect took place through their parasocial interactions with the lead character.

The results of this study show the importance of considering viewers' individual differences as part of the media-viewing experience, particularly their gender identity. The first hypothesis was supported, which predicted that more feminine participants who viewed a female lead character (as opposed to a male lead) in a politically-driven plotline (as opposed to a family-driven plotline) would experience greater levels of parasocial interaction. These results are in line with previous research finding that gender similarities between viewers and media characters increase the desire to be more like the character (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005).

However, this relationship did not hold when more feminine participants viewed a female lead character addressing a family-based situation, as the connections involving parasocial interactions were no longer statistically significant. Instead, it appears that the non-stereotypical representation of women is necessary to facilitate parasocial interactions, particularly for individuals whose gender identity matches that of the character. These findings suggest that the representation of women as lead characters on television is not enough on its own to bring about downstream political effects through parasocial processes. Instead, those representations must include women in non-stereotypical roles, such as that of a political leader.

This leads to the second hypothesis, where this study found support for previous research in that parasocial processes caused by viewing a female lead character in a political context increased the likelihood of future political engagement (Hoewe & Sherrill, 2019[1]). In this study, parasocial interaction represented the necessary mediating variable in facilitating the impact of the viewing of political TV shows on future political self-efficacy, interest, and participation. That is, the parasocially-driven interactions that viewers with greater feminine gender identity had with the female lead character in the show was crucial in establishing these downstream positive political outcomes.

[1]Hoewe and Sherrill (2019) included transportation as a mediating variable preceding parasocial relationships in their model. Reexamining their data and removing transportation from their model still produces a well-fitting structural equation model, $\chi^2(343, N = 218) = 518.29$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 1.51$; RMSEA =.05 (90% confidence interval:.04 to.06); CFI =.97. Using a chi-square difference test, the model without transportation achieved a better level of fit than did the model that included it ($\Delta\chi^2 = 207.73$, $DF = 144$; $p < .001$). These results suggest that parasocial processes – not transportation – facilitate effects on political engagement.

The results of this study suggest several important contributions to scholarship in this area. Of particular interest is the fact that participants' gender identity was the principal moderating variable in this study, as individuals who identified as more feminine were more likely to engage in parasocial interactions with the female lead character in a political TV show. This result did not appear for lower levels of femininity (or higher levels of masculinity) or when considering a binary measure of participants' gender. Though measures of femininity and masculinity were highly correlated with participants' gender, the continuous measure of femininity was more successful in understanding the relationships. These findings suggest that the consideration of gender identity as a continuous variable (rather than dichotomous) may be better suited for studies about the impact of gender representations in the media, providing support for previous calls to undertake such research (e.g., Cobb et al., 2009; Lenning, 2009).

Additionally, with respect to parasocial processes, the moderating influence of gender identity in this study further suggests that the match between the viewer's and the main character's gender identity is an important relationship to consider in studies of media influence. Scholars have suggested that parasocial relationships can function similarly to interpersonal relationships (e.g., Perse & Rubin, 1989), perhaps allowing for greater transference of the activities undertaken by the main character and the viewers' perception of the attainability of those activities for themselves. For example, the politically-driven plotline used in this study's stimulus showed a female political leader making decisions that ultimately solved a political crisis. It appears that viewing this type of TV content can inspire individuals, particularly individuals who identify as feminine, to feel more able and willing to participate in politics.

Considering the implications of stereotype threat, it seems productive to interrogate both the prominence of this relatively well-established phenomenon in terms of political media consumption and the conditions under which exposure to media content may undermine its presence in certain viewers. Along these lines, most scholarly literature on both general and political topics has concluded that comparatively negative events, information, and impressions are more vividly remembered and for longer periods of time (e.g., Vaish et al., 2008). One potential theoretical connection could be the relationship between the retention of negative stimuli and stereotype threat, where negative stereotypical representations are particularly potent. Considering this, viewing women in positions of political power could serve as a source of exposure to a contradictory (i.e., positive) and particularly memorable narrative relationship. In a sense, this experience could serve as a short- and/or long-term tonic for individuals who may otherwise be likely to experience stereotype threat related to their political acumen. Over time, a competing positive portrayal of women in politics might come to equal or exceed prior negative stereotypes, eventually

sparking increased political engagement among women viewers. Coupled with prior research (Hoewe & Sherrill, 2019), the results of this study take a step forward in showing that stereotype threat has the potential to be overcome through parasocial interactions and relationships with TV show characters, particularly with female lead characters in political dramas.

Limitations and Future Research

Though they are limited in their availability in current American television, other political shows with female lead characters should be considered in future research. This research also should consider studying women characters in varying occupational contexts to determine if the scripts activated in participants' minds (e.g., leadership, power) are possible with other non-stereotypical representations. The results of this study address one specific non-stereotypical context – politics – where links to downstream political engagement are possible. The model tested here should be utilized in other contexts to see if these relationships have an even greater scope of impact. Additionally, the sample used for this study consisted of college students, most of whom had little familiarity with the shows used as stimuli. Though the goal of this research was geared toward internal validity (since Hoewe & Sherrill's, 2019 survey focused on external validity), it is possible that the amount and/or consistency of viewing these shows could change the influence on parasocial interactions and relationships and, thus, viewers' intentions for future political engagement. Given the small number of participants who reported prior viewing of these shows, this possibility was not tested here. This study's experimental test represents a more stringent attempt at facilitating such parasocial processes, and prior research suggests that over-time viewing would only strengthen these relationships and their connections to downstream political engagement (Hoewe & Sherrill, 2019).

Conclusions

These results provide support for Campbell and Wolbrecht's (2006) work regarding the role model effect as well as Hoewe and Sherrill's (2019) study regarding female lead characters in political TV, where fictional female political leaders may serve as inspiration for viewers with feminine gender identity. This study presents causal evidence that individuals who identify as more feminine respond to female lead characters in politically-driven TV shows by engaging in parasocial interactions with them, which translates into future political self-efficacy, interest, and participation. That is, when the gender identity of the viewer matches that of the main character in a politically-driven TV show, more feminine individuals take inspiration from the female lead character, sparking future political engagement.

Therefore, the creation of more shows like *Madam Secretary* could inspire a greater number of women, girls, and feminine individuals to become more politically engaged.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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