

A magically nice guy: Parasocial relationships with Harry Potter across different cultures

the International
Communication Gazette
73(3) 252–269
© The Author(s) 2011
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1748048510393658
gaz.sagepub.com



Hannah Schmid

Hanover University of Music and Drama, Germany

Christoph Klimmt

Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz, Germany

Abstract

This study explored parasocial relationships (PSRs) with Harry Potter that readers from different cultures have developed. An overall sample of 2551 Potter fans from Germany (individualistic culture) and Mexico (collectivistic culture) completed an online questionnaire assessing their parasocial relationship with the character. Fans from the collectivistic culture rated Potter's sociability higher than fans from the individualistic culture. For fans from both cultures, social attraction turned out as most important determinant of PSRs with Potter, while homophily ranked lowest. Overall, PSRs and fandom turned out to be quite similar across cultures, with some differences in character perception and relative importance of social attraction. Implications for parasocial relationships as (inter)cultural phenomena and cross-cultural appreciation of media entertainment are discussed.

Keywords

collectivism, cross-cultural research, culture, Harry Potter, individualism, media entertainment, parasocial relationships

Corresponding author:

Hannah Schmid, Department of Journalism and Communication Research, Hanover University of Music, Drama and Media, Expo Plaza 12, D-30159 Hanover, Germany
Email: Hannah.Schmid@ijk.hmtm-hannover.de

Introduction

Entertainment media represent a major portion of international mass communication content and structures. Many book publishers, film, television and video game companies operate at the global level and market their content across areas of different cultures and languages (Blakley, 2001). The international diffusion of media entertainment shapes regional cultures and contributes to the evolution of transcultural global audiences. In fact, a variety of entertainment media have achieved remarkable success in very different parts of the world. The *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, or *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, for instance, have attracted huge audiences in numerous countries. Similar cross-national diffusions occur with TV shows (e.g. *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*), video games (e.g. *Grand Theft Auto*) and of course novels such as the *Harry Potter* series. On the other hand, as media products are affected by cultural values (Trepte, 2008), there are also many examples of, for instance, films or books that were only successful in one country and bombed in others. As the phenomenon of 'global entertainment' has not gained much attention in communication science yet, we still know little about the driving factors leading to global success or about intercultural differences in the underlying appreciation processes.

For many entertainment media, audience appreciation of *characters* has been found key to their success. Communication scholars have elaborated the concept of parasocial relationships (PSRs) to explain the social-affective response of media users to (entertainment) personae in the media and to illustrate the connection between character appreciation, media enjoyment and media selection (Giles, 2002; Hartmann et al., 2008; Horton and Wohl, 1956; Klimmt et al., 2006).

Like many kinds of media entertainment, the book series *Harry Potter* is centred on a few characters, with the protagonist Harry Potter especially playing a dominant role. According to the publisher, over 375 million copies of the *Harry Potter* books have been sold worldwide. This overwhelming success demonstrates that people all over the world feel entertained by the series and indicates strong positive parasocial relationships with the protagonist in readers from very different (cultural) backgrounds. *Harry Potter* seems to be so universally attractive that even readers from different cultures form pleasant social bonds with him. But is the parasocial relationship in all cultures the same? And what about the driving factors which lead to such a 'liking' of the protagonist? Does cultural background influence parasocial relationships with fictional entertainment characters, or do fans' long-term responses to such characters not differ across cultures at all?

This question is relevant to understand both the structural characteristics of PSRs as well as the cross-cultural success of entertainment media. Culture-specific PSR characteristics would have different implications for the contribution of characters and celebrities to international media success compared to a cross-culturally stable, unified PSR profile of entertainment protagonists. The former would imply that PSRs serve different social-emotional functions in different cultures; the latter in turn would suggest universal affective functions of entertainment characters that are not culture-dependent. The present study therefore compares the quality of PSRs with an internationally popular media protagonist (*Harry Potter*) in fans from different cultural backgrounds. As there still does not exist much research in this field, our study is explorative in nature.

We first outline parasocial relationship theory and then discuss relevant findings from cross-cultural communication research. A large-scale online survey is reported that illuminates the research questions derived from literature work; we discuss the results in terms of the concept of PSRs and its viability in cross-cultural communication as well as with respect to the global diffusion of media entertainment.

Parasocial relationships

Originally, research on parasocial relationships did not differentiate the concept from parasocial interactions (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Rubin and McHugh, 1987). Meanwhile, greater precision has been achieved, as parasocial interactions (PSIs) are conceptualized as immediate psychological responses of media users to media characters in the moment of exposure, whereas parasocial relationships (PSRs) are more or less stable, long-term constructs media users hold and can access both during and between exposure to messages featuring a media character (for an overview, see Giles, 2002; Hartmann et al., 2004; Klimmt et al., 2006). Repeated PSIs over time can result in a PSR with the mediated character, with each subsequent PSI potentially affecting the quality and intensity of the PSR and the PSR already held influencing the PSI's quality of subsequent encounters with the media character (e.g. Perse and Rubin, 1989; Rubin and McHugh, 1987).

Although PSRs display interesting similarities with real-life social relationships (Gleich 1996, for instance, has shown that some PSRs are equivalent to people's attachment to a likeable neighbour), they occupy distinct positions within a person's social network. Their unique role is rooted in their instrumental value: media users can decide autonomously whether they want to establish, continue, or break up (Eyal and Cohen, 2006) a PSR; they do not have to accept rules and obligations that are inevitably implied in real-life relationships; and PSRs are typically less dynamic than real-life relationships, as most media characters display very stable characteristics and cannot respond individually to the social behaviours of media users like, for example, friends or neighbours do. Therefore, PSRs enable simulated or vicarious social experiences that people may find entertaining (Hoffner and Cantor, 1991; Vorderer et al., 2004) without demanding much effort or imposing obligations and responsibilities like real-life relationships (Klimmt et al., 2006). They are therefore relevant extensions of the social networks people benefit from; for instance, media characters can serve as role models and the relationship with them can help teenagers in constructing their own identity and learn more about social roles and role-compatible behaviour (Fisher-Keller, 1997).

Serial media formats – like the seven Harry Potter books – facilitate the development of PSRs (e.g. Vorderer and Knobloch, 1996): to meet likeable characters repeatedly can cause highly pleasant experiences of familiarity and friendship. Furthermore, strong parasocial relationships may lead to an active search for other media (for example, new books) in which the favourite character appears (Giles, 2002). Serial entertainment media are therefore likely to trigger cyclic audience responses of building, maintaining and benefiting from existing PSRs.

Following past research the development of a parasocial relationship may be affected by the attractiveness (Hoffner, 1996; McCroskey and McCain, 1974; Rubin and

McHugh, 1987) of a character. Media characters – and we argue that this is especially true for Harry Potter – often display special and highly attractive characteristics which the media users either strongly admire and/or are longing to acquire themselves (Hoffner, 1996; Hoffner and Buchanan, 2005). McCroskey and McCain (1974) divide attractiveness into physical (referring to the physical appearance of the character), social (referring to the personality and agreeableness of the character) and task attraction (referring to the competence and success the character displays). Rubin and McHugh (1987) found that social attraction is a more important predictor of the development of a parasocial relationship than physical attraction. However, different media characters may offer different attraction modes that lead to a PSR with them: the PSR of male adolescents with female supermodels is likely to be driven by physical attraction and erotic desire, for example (see also Giles, 2002; Klimmt et al., 2006).

Besides the attractiveness of a character, the development of a parasocial relationship may depend on the perceived commonalities between viewers or readers and a media protagonist (Hoorn and Konijn, 2003; McCroskey et al., 1975). On the one hand, the social-psychology literature suggests that commonalities between individuals render the evolution of a personal relationship much more likely (Baron, 1997). It is therefore plausible to assume that strong, positive parasocial relationships will emerge primarily between media users and media characters with similar characteristics and backgrounds (see also Turner, 1993). In contrast, other studies have shown that the more a character is different, the more s/he is attractive because differences may be found interesting (e.g. exotic) or cause positive responses through social comparison (e.g. Algoe and Haidt, 2009). Furthermore, Eyal and Rubin (2003) found in their study that trait aggressiveness (as indicator for homophily with the character) did not predict the development of a PSR with an aggressive character.

Similarly to attraction, homophily unites different facets. McCroskey et al. (1975) differentiate attitude, background, value and appearance homophily. Homophily, then, implies a sense of closeness to and familiarity with the character, a relationship characteristic that facilitates uncertainty reduction and positive experiences of shared group membership between viewers/readers and character (Hoffner and Buchanan, 2005).

In sum, the literature on PSRs suggests that there is considerable variability in the quality of PSRs with media characters (e.g. different kinds of attraction and homophily) that may result in different implications of PSRs for media enjoyment. For instance, a television series like *Baywatch* may facilitate PSRs with its cast through the major quality of physical attraction, which then allows enjoyable experiences of ‘being together’ or simulating a romantic situation on the beach with an admirably beautiful and likeable person (Klimmt et al., 2006). In this example, the PSR drives an escapist mode of entertainment (Katz and Foulkes, 1962); other media formats and characters may benefit from homophily-based PSRs (e.g. a ‘real-life’ format; Nabi et al., 2003), which then triggers alternative manifestations of enjoyment (Vorderer et al., 2004). Concerning the present research problem, the main conclusion so far is that PSR theory is open to modelling inter-individual and also cross-cultural differences in relationship quality and offers dimensions to assess for empirical comparisons of different people’s (or audiences’) PSR to a given media character such as Harry Potter.

Cultural differences: Arguments for diversity in parasocial relationships

Watching a film or reading a book is a constructive process: users always interpret and evaluate media content based on their existing knowledge and (cultural) background. Bartlett demonstrated as early as 1932 that cultural schemata influence the recollection of a story. When English students re-narrated a native American fairy tale, they modified the original story so that the fairy tale fit better their own cultural background and beliefs; they not only forgot details, but invented additional information so that the story became a 'more English one'.

Psychologically, culture may be defined as 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another' (Hofstede, 2004: 8). A 'category of people' could be a nation, a tribe, or any other comparable group of people. On a macro level, 'collective programming' refers to a common set of symbols and rituals which the individual adopts in the course of socialization. On a micro level, culture offers schemata and expectations that guide information processing (e.g. value-based decisions) and actions.

One of the most important concepts in intercultural psychology (Matsumoto, 2004) to distinguish cultures along different value-dimensions is the concept of individualism versus collectivism (for an overview, see Kim, 1994; Oyserman et al., 2002; Triandis, 1995). In individualistic cultures, people mainly take care of themselves and their direct social surroundings, while in collectivistic cultures the individual is more deeply involved in social groups (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis et al., 1990). In collectivistic cultures, the group protects the individual but also demands loyalty. Harmony within the group is very important (Kim and Markus, 1999; Triandis and Suh, 2002). Individualistic cultures emphasize the uniqueness of every individual, and to be differentiable from others is an important goal. In collectivistic cultures, in contrast, conformity is not connoted negatively, but is appreciated as a positive contribution to cohesion and harmony. According to Hofstede (2001), individualistic cultures often belong to the 'western' cultures of the world (e.g. Western European nations, the USA, Australia or Canada), whereas most South or Central American countries, large parts of Asia and West Africa are rather collectivistic.

As mentioned earlier, culture affects individual functioning in many ways, which holds implications for the present research problem. For instance, members of individualistic cultures learn to focus their attention on themselves and their own actions, whereas collectivistic cultures prioritize the context and the relations within their social surroundings (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett et al., 2001; Smith and Bond, 1998). These observations imply that people from different cultures prefer different characteristics in perceiving and evaluating other persons (Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Forgas, 1983). As mediated characters are evaluated along (most of) the same dimensions as real persons (see earlier), we assume that these cultural differences also exist in the perception of Harry Potter and therefore also in the parasocial relationships with him.

In communication research, the overall phenomenon of 'global entertainment' has not gained much attention yet (Blakley, 2001; Gudykunst and Lee, 2003) and most theories and concepts (like the concept of parasocial relations to mediated

characters) have rarely or never been tested in multi-country, cross-cultural research designs. One highly informative study has been published by Liebes and Katz (1986), however. They investigated how members of different cultures use and interpret mediated content and analysed the understanding of the TV series *Dallas* in five different cultural groups (Arabs, Moroccan Jews, Russians, Israelis and US-Americans) (Liebes, 1988; Liebes and Katz, 1986, 1993). They found interesting cultural differences in the retelling of the storyline. The authors see the success of the series in its universal character: the series deals with common problems, which are relevant in many different cultures. But at the same time, there is enough room for culture-specific interpretations: 'Such programs may beam a homogeneous message to the global village, but our study argues that there is a pluralism in decoding' (Liebes and Katz, 1993: 152; see also Havens, 2000). On the other hand, studies have shown that people often prefer domestic, home-made media programmes (Beeden and De Bruin, 2010; IP, 2008; Trepte, 2008). This specific local taste has been referred to as cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991).

As the Harry Potter book series is overwhelmingly successful all over the world (and not only in England), it seems reasonable to expect similar cultural differences as Liebes and Katz found for *Dallas*. The novel deals with ubiquitous themes as for example the fight of good against evil. Moreover, the books communicate universally valid values like friendship or team spirit. While such assumptions can be grounded on the content of the Potter books, it remains an empirical question whether there is also – as with *Dallas* – a 'pluralism in decoding', that is, whether parasocial responses to Harry Potter differ across cultures.

Research questions

Research on cultural differences and on parasocial relationships suggests that there can be (but not necessarily has to be) variability in the formation of readers' PSRs with a protagonist like Harry Potter. The international success of the novel leads to the conclusion that fans all over the world have a strong positive parasocial relationship with Harry Potter. But as Liebes and Katz found for *Dallas*, there could be a 'pluralism in decoding' in the sense that different cultures vary in their development of the relationship with the character. One of the most important patterns in cultural-comparative research is the distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

Following Hofstede's (2004) argument that culture as 'collective programming' affects people's social information processing, differences in the decoding of entertainment media may already begin at the level of how a fictional character is perceived. In the case of Harry Potter, cultural background may thus cause differences in the way readers represent Potter's characteristics internally or, in other words, how they describe Harry Potter as a person. As collectivistic cultures emphasize the affiliation of individuals in social networks, it is probable that members of such cultures assign more importance to attributes relevant to social interactions and group harmony when they describe a media protagonist (e.g. friendliness or helpfulness). In contrast, members of individualistic cultures should find more salient in their person description those attributes that

relate to independence and firmness ('ego' attributes such as self-confidence or decisiveness). Because social perceptions of characters are connected to the development and strength of PSRs, cultural differences in 'reading' the personality attributes of a protagonist would mark a first indication that culture affects parasocial relationships.

RQ1: Are there differences in the characterization of Harry Potter between fans from individualistic and collectivistic cultures?

Building on the conceptual work reviewed earlier, the two predictors of PSRs, *attraction/admiration* and *homophily* promise to be useful for a further empirical exploration of cultural differences in PSR qualities.

Linking the different predictors of PSRs with the cultural value-dimension of individualism/collectivism allows us to derive several assumptions on cultural differences. Concerning the PSR predictor admiration/attraction, we propose assumptions about the subdimensions task attraction and social attraction. First, it is probable that for Potter fans from individualistic cultures, as they focus rather on the individual person and her/his actions, Potter's task attraction (specifically with respect to Potter's competence and success) is more important to building a parasocial relationship than for fans from collectivistic cultures. In turn, collectivistic fans would not emphasize the individual superiority of Potter, so the task attraction factor should be less pronounced in forming a PSR for fans from collectivistic cultures.

On the other hand, collectivist cultures rather attend to the person as a whole and emphasize their embeddedness in specific social groups. As a consequence, it could be possible that collectivistic fans rather admire the general way Harry Potter is and his personality; so for fans of collectivistic cultures Potter's social attraction should be more important to develop a relationship with the character than for fans of individualistic cultures. But as there does not exist any research in that field, we are cautious to suggest related hypotheses and formulate a research question instead:

RQ2: Are there differences concerning the importance of the perceived subdimensions of attraction of Harry Potter for building a parasocial relationship with the character between fans from individualistic and collectivistic cultures?

Furthermore, as Harry Potter is an English boy whose everyday habits (e.g. food preferences, clothing style) are rooted in British culture, English Potter fans or, more generally, fans from Western European (individualistic) cultures should display a more pronounced homophily component of their PSR than readers from rather distal (collectivistic) cultures such as Latin America. The latter should notice dissimilarities in values, attitudes, everyday behaviours, style, etc. between themselves and Potter more frequently and thus develop a PSR with lower homophily. This should be true for both homophily dimensions – value and attitude homophily. On the other hand, it is plausible to assume that the more the character is different the more s/he is attractive, which would imply that the lower homophily in collectivistic fans would facilitate a stronger PSR. So as both directions of impact between homophily and PSR are plausible, we formulate another research question:

RQ3: Are there differences concerning the importance of the perceived subdimensions of homophily of Harry Potter for building a parasocial relationship with the character between fans from individualistic and collectivistic cultures?

Method

Respondents

An online survey of Harry Potter fans in an individualistic (Germany) and a rather collectivistic (Mexico) country was conducted in May and June 2005. A total of 2551 respondents (61 percent from Germany, 39 percent from Mexico) completed the questionnaire. Due to uneven distributions of male and female respondents in the two samples (73 percent of the German respondents, but only 26 percent of the Mexican participants were male), we randomly selected a smaller subsample for each cultural group to achieve a balanced gender distribution across subsamples. The following analysis is therefore based on a total of 1358 respondents (50 percent Germans, 50 percent Mexicans) with an equal gender distribution in the two subsamples (in each 39 percent males, 61 percent females). Age of the subjects ranged from 10 to 56 years ($M = 20.25$ years, $SD = 7.8$ years). German respondents were older on average ($M = 22.97$ years, $SD = 9.3$ years) than the Mexicans ($M = 17.52$ years, $SD = 4.48$ years). Most participants were school pupils or students (ranging from 60 percent in Germany to 88 percent in Mexico). The Harry Potter books and movies were very popular among respondents: all had read or seen at least one of the books or films once; 61 percent had read all books several times; 78 percent had viewed all released movies more than once; there were no differences between the two nations. The sample thus comprised mostly of Harry Potter fans whose parasocial relationship was likely to be well developed and intense.

Procedure

The selection of countries for recruitment of respondents was planned to maximize cultural differences in the final sample. Germany was chosen as a typical individualistic culture. The Latin American countries are considered as highly collectivistic (Hofstede, 2004), so as counterpart to Germany, Mexico was selected for the study. The most efficient way to realize our research was to conduct an online survey.

For each country, various highly frequented Harry Potter websites were invited to collaborate for recruitment of respondents (e.g. www.harrypotter-xperts.de; www.harrylatino.com). Additionally, emails to contact persons in the different countries who had been found over the internet were sent with a polite request to distribute the link of the questionnaire. Participants were assured of the anonymity of their responses.

Measures and scale construction

In cultural-comparative research projects it is very important to assure comparability in all stages of the research process (Harkness, 2003; Lonner and Berry, 1986; Matsumoto and Juang, 2004; Palmer and Barnett, 1984). For survey studies, the most difficult task is the correct translation of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was thus designed in German and translated into Spanish by professional, bilingual translators. Afterwards we conducted pretests for each version with several bilingual experts and discussed with them the meaning of the different questions and items. Based on their propositions, we adapted the translated questionnaire.

Character description. A semantic differential served as a tool to assess respondents' description of Harry Potter. Rating questions for five pairs of words measured the strength of 'social attributes' (e.g. selfless–selfish, helpful–inconsiderate) and another four pairs represented the 'ego-attributes' (e.g. decisive–indecisive, self-confident–insecure). Two scales were constructed by averaging the ratings for the individual items, one scale representing the 'social attributes' ($\alpha_{\text{German}} = .75$; $\alpha_{\text{Mexican}} = .7$) and the other for the 'ego attributes' ($\alpha_{\text{German}} = .57$; $\alpha_{\text{Mexican}} = .55$).

Parasocial relationship. As there was often no clear theoretical differentiation between the concepts of PSI and PSR in past research, an approved scale to measure only PSR or its preceding factors does not exist (for an overview, see Schramm and Hartmann, 2008). Therefore, we relied on different sources to build the scales for our study (see below). Furthermore, some authors argue that the valence of a PSR could be positive or negative (Schramm and Hartmann, 2008). In our case, however, we only had fans in our sample who indicated an intensive use of all the Harry Potter books and movies. Following past entertainment research, it would not be plausible to assume that they have a negative parasocial relationship with Harry Potter. So we did not include any negative items in our measurement of the parasocial relationship and its predictors. The detailed scales are described in the following (a list of all items is presented in the Appendix).

To measure the parasocial relationship with Harry Potter, we adapted parts of the scale originally developed by Gleich (1996). Three items measured the extent to which the fans liked Harry Potter (e.g. I like Harry Potter a lot). Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The scale was constructed by averaging the ratings for the individual items, with higher scores indicating a greater liking of Harry Potter ($\alpha_{\text{German}} = .72$; $\alpha_{\text{Mexican}} = .68$).

The dimensions of physical attraction and appearance homophily were originally designed to measure the parasocial relationship with television characters. In television, the appearance of the media persona is surely an important factor for viewers' response. But as Harry Potter is basically a character from a book, actively construed in readers' imagination, we assume that his appearance is a less relevant dimension for developing a parasocial relationship with him and therefore excluded these aspects from our study. Given the popularity of the Potter films and the celebrity status of the actor playing Harry Potter (Daniel Radcliffe), the issue of 'cross-media' physical attraction was left to further studies in order to reduce complexity for the current cross-cultural research design.

Admiration/attraction. Admiration for Harry Potter was measured with a total of eight items, five measuring social attraction (e.g. Harry Potter could be a friend of mine) and three indicating the degree of task attraction (e.g. I always trust Harry Potter to overcome any problems he faces). The admiration/attraction scale was composed of questions from Visscher and Vorderer (1998), which used a slightly modified version of the original scale from McCroskey and McCain (1974). Responses to the items were on a five-point Likert scale, and were averaged to form a single admiration scale ($\alpha_{\text{German}} =$

.74; $\alpha_{\text{Mexican}} = .74$). Higher scores indicate greater admiration. For in-depth analysis we formed a single index for the subdimension social attraction ($\alpha_{\text{German}} = .72$; $\alpha_{\text{Mexican}} = .75$). Due to unsatisfying alpha scores for the subdimension 'task attraction' we deleted one item. The remaining two items were averaged to build a single scale with still only limited homogeneity ($\alpha_{\text{German}} = .64$; $\alpha_{\text{Mexican}} = .53$).

Homophily. The scale contained three items measuring attitude homophily and two items measuring value homophily. We did not consider background homophily in our study. Due to the fantasy background of Harry Potter and his completely fictional life circumstances, perceived background homophily was not conceived as a relevant dimension. To measure attitude and value homophily, we adapted the scale used by Visscher and Vorderer (1998), which is based on the scales of McCroskey et al. (1975) and Turner (1993). We averaged responses to indicate the level of homophily ($\alpha_{\text{German}} = .80$; $\alpha_{\text{Mexican}} = .83$). For further analysis we computed separated indices for the two subdimensions attitude ($\alpha_{\text{German}} = .76$; $\alpha_{\text{Mexican}} = .75$) and value homophily ($\alpha_{\text{German}} = .55$; $\alpha_{\text{Mexican}} = .72$).

Testing for effects of the demographic variables on parasocial relationships

A potential obstacle to finding intercultural differences in the intensity and composition of PSRs with Harry Potter was that the subsamples from the different cultural spheres were not completely homogeneous concerning the distribution of gender, age and profession. Therefore, prior to addressing the actual research questions, an ANOVA tested the effects of these demographic variables on the PSR with Harry Potter. Culture (Mexicans as collectivistic culture vs Germans as individualistic culture), gender, profession (pupil/student, employed, unemployed) and age (up to 14 years, 15–17 years, 18–29 years) were entered as independent variables, and the PSR index (see Measures section) served as dependent variable.

Only culture and age were found to affect PSRs significantly (see Table 1). Therefore, participant age was controlled in the analyses that addressed the research questions on cultural differences in PSRs.

Table 1. Influence of culture, age, gender and profession on PSR

| | Culture ^b M (SD) | | Age ^c M (SD) | | |
|------------------|-----------------------------|------------|-------------------------|------------|------------|
| | Collectivistic | Individual | Up to 14 | 15–17 | 18–29 |
| PSR ^a | 3.46 (1.04) | 2.97 (.82) | 3.69 (.94) | 3.26 (.97) | 3.02 (.93) |

^a $F(9, 1149) = 8.36, p < .0001, R^2_{\text{adj}} = .12$.

^b $F(1, 1157) = 15.52, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .013$.

^c $F(2, 1156) = 28.86, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .048$.

Gender and profession had no significant influence on PSR; none of the interaction effects was significant (all $F < 1$).

Table 2. Influence of attraction and homophily on the PSR (with age partialized out) with Harry Potter

| | β | T |
|--|---------|--------|
| Collectivistic subsample ^a | | |
| Attraction | .55 | 17.59* |
| Homophily | .27 | 8.6* |
| Individualistic subsample ^b | | |
| Attraction | .42 | 11.49* |
| Homophily | .27 | 7.36* |

* $p < .0001$.

^a $F(2, 675) = 413.88, p < .0001, R^2_{adj} = .55$.

^b $F(2, 676) = 212.48, p < .0001, R^2_{adj} = .38$.

Results

Differences between the two subsamples in the PSR with Harry Potter were analysed first. In general, the fans reported a fair parasocial relationship with the character ($M = 3.21, SD = .97$), with a positive tendency. An ANOVA revealed that Mexican fans ($M_M = 3.46, SD = 1.04$) have a stronger parasocial relationship with Harry Potter than the German subsample ($M_G = 2.97, SD = .82; F(1, 1356) = 94.16, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .07$). These results remain stable when the effect of age is controlled. Based on these results, it seems that fans from collectivistic cultures perceive a stronger relationship with Harry Potter than do fans from individualistic cultures.

Further preliminary analyses addressed intercultural differences in the rating of Harry Potter's attraction and the perceived homophily. A country comparison of the perceived attraction of Harry Potter finds that the character is in general more attractive for fans from collectivistic cultures ($M_M = 3.54, SD = .85$) than for fans of individualistic cultures ($M_G = 3.21, SD = .74; F(1, 1355) = 58.29, p < .00001, \eta^2 = .04$). A second ANOVA revealed the details: for fans from Mexico (collectivistic culture; $M = 3.7, SD = .94$), Harry Potter holds a significantly higher social attraction than for the German fans (individualistic culture; $M = 3.19, SD = .82; F(1, 355) = 116.5, p < .00001, \eta^2 = .08$). In contrast, fans from the individualistic culture ($M = 3.24, SD = 1.0$) report a very slightly higher task attraction of Harry Potter than fans from the collectivistic culture ($M = 3.1, SD = 1.2; F(1, 1355) = 5.89, p < .05, \eta^2 < .01$). These results remain stable when the influence of age is controlled.

Concerning homophily, only marginal cultural differences occurred: collectivists perceive a higher homophily with Harry Potter than individualists do ($M_M = 2.73, SD = 1.04; M_G = 2.58, SD = .79; F(1, 1355) = 9.09, p < .05, \eta^2 < .01$).

The findings from the analysis of the person description of Harry Potter (RQ1) converge with the results on social attraction, as they suggest that fans from collectivistic cultures rate the protagonist's 'social attributes' higher ($M = 4.1, SD = .62$) than fans from individualistic cultures ($M = 3.8, SD = .62; F(1, 1352) = 135.35, p < .00001, \eta^2 = .09$). However, the same pattern occurs for the 'ego-attributes',

Table 3. Influence of the subdimensions of attraction and homophily on the PSR (with age partialized out) with Harry Potter

| | β | T |
|--|---------|--------|
| Collectivistic subsample ^a | | |
| Social attraction | .59 | 18.93* |
| Attitude homophily | .15 | 4.36* |
| Value homophily | .11 | 3.05* |
| Individualistic subsample ^b | | |
| Social attraction | .47 | 11.60* |
| Value homophily | .16 | 4.06* |
| Attitude homophily | .09 | 2.08* |

* $p < .05$.

^a $F(2, 673) = 239.15, p < .0001, R^2_{adj} = .59$; task attraction was no significant predictor in the model.

^b $F(2, 675) = 115.2, p < .0001, R^2_{adj} = .40$; task attraction was no significant predictor in the model.

which were rated slightly higher by collectivistic fans ($M = 4.5, SD = .51$) in comparison to the individualistic ones ($M = 4.3, SD = .51$; $F(1, 1351) = 41.56, p < .00001, \eta^2 = .03$). These effects remain stable when age is controlled as a covariate.

The remaining two research questions address intercultural differences in the importance of the predictors attraction and homophily for the development of a parasocial relationship with Harry Potter. To test these influences, we ran a multiple regression model for each subsample with attraction and homophily as independent and PSR as dependent variable. As we knew from the former analysis that the Mexican subsample is younger and that age has a significant impact on homophily, we first partialized out the impact of age on PSR and conducted all further analysis with the residual PSR variable (see Table 2).

In general the model shows that the perceived attraction of the character is the most important predictor for developing a parasocial relationship, followed by homophily. Comparing the two subsamples we can see that attraction is even more important for the collectivistic culture than it is for the individualistic fans. So these first results show that the theoretical model of attraction and homophily predicting the parasocial relationship seems to be true for both cultural groups. The empirical answers to RQ2 and RQ3 is that there is no intercultural difference in the importance of homophily and a small difference concerning the importance of attraction.

The results in Table 3 show that for both subsamples 'social attraction' is the most important predictor for developing a parasocial relationship with the character. No differences between the individualistic and collectivistic culture concerning the impact of the homophily subdimensions on PSR occurred.

In sum, the results indicate that fans from Mexico (a collectivistic culture) and fans from Germany (an individualistic culture) display very similar patterns of parasocial relationships with Harry Potter. Mexican fans rate Potter's social attractiveness somewhat higher than German fans, and the relative importance of social attractiveness for the overall strength of the PSR is a little greater for Mexican fans.

Discussion

The present survey explored whether fans from individualistic and collectivistic cultures differ in their 'decoding' and resulting parasocial relationship with a globally popular media character, Harry Potter. First, the ways fans from different cultures perceive the character were compared. Mexican fans found Potter more sociable than did German fans; however, they also rated his 'ego' or 'individualistic' attributes slightly higher. A general cultural response bias may overshadow cultural differences in character perception. Given the substantial portion of explained variance in sociability ratings ($\eta^2 = .09$) and the higher rating of Potter's social attractiveness obtained from Mexican respondents, a careful interpretation would assume collectivistic fans indeed decode Potter in a way that is more compatible with their cultural norms and expectations (i.e. sociability, orientation towards the group; cf. Kim, 1994). At the level of character perception, culture would then play a role in the development of the PSR, and Harry Potter as a transculturally popular character is found capable of appealing to fans with different 'collective programmings' concerning expectations of what an attractive person should be like. Potter is (likely) both sociable enough to appeal to readers from collectivistic cultures and at the same time at least sufficiently independent and assertive to appeal to readers from individualistic cultures as well.

The second step of exploration was to compare the relative importance of attractiveness and homophily for the strength of fans' PSR. Regression analysis found that the 'architecture' of PSRs is quite similar across cultures, with attraction (especially social attraction) explaining the most variance in PSRs and homophily ranking lower concerning its impact on PSR. The observed minor importance of the homophily dimension converges with results reported by Eyal and Rubín (2003). As trait aggressiveness did not predict the development of a PSR with an aggressive character in their study, readers in our study did not rely strongly on similarity of their cultural background as an important factor in their PSR with Harry Potter. The only notable cultural difference occurred in the explanatory power of social attraction, which was somewhat higher in the collectivistic sample ($\beta = .59$, see Table 3) than in the individualistic sample ($\beta = .47$). While there is a need to replicate this finding (see below), we conclude that collectivistic fans (compared to individualistic fans) tend to perceive Potter as more sociable and assign more importance to social attractiveness concerning their overall PSR with the character. Taken together, these exploratory findings suggest that there are at least some cultural differences in how PSRs with media protagonists who appear in different cultures evolve.

On the other hand, the findings also indicate a great deal of similarity between Mexican and German fans. Many examined constructs (character descriptions, attractiveness and homophily ratings, and PSR levels as well) were found not to differ between the subsamples to a substantial degree or turned out not to differ at all. Most importantly, the examined predictors of PSRs, attractiveness and homophily, displayed very similar explanatory effects in the regression analyses across the subsamples (with the one rather small exception of social attraction discussed above; see Tables 2 and 3). So no fundamental differences between individualistic and collectivistic fans emerged, and the overall interpretation is that PSR-based fandom for Harry Potter is a transcultural phenomenon with some small culture-specific variations. In other words, PSRs and

fandom share many similarities around the world and across cultures, but they also seem to display some minor differences in character perception and causal construction. The 'pluralism in decoding' that Liebes and Katz (1986) found in their cultural comparison of *Dallas* viewers thus seems to play only a minor role when it comes to character worship and strength of PSRs.

The present survey comes with several methodological limitations, of course. First, the two subsamples are built on self-selection and are thus not representative of Harry Potter fans in the different countries. The original full sample displayed a very uneven distribution of gender in the different countries and also a notable difference in average participant age. Several reasons may account for these discrepancies: they may have resulted from varying self-selection processes: maybe online recruiting was effective for different subpopulations of the Harry Potter fan communities in Mexico and Germany, so the different composition of subsamples would reflect a methodological problem of procedural variation across investigated cultures (see Matsumoto and Juang, 2004). An alternative explanation would be that Harry Potter attracts different people in the two countries. This question remains open for future empirical studies that employ representative samples. Therefore, replications with probability samples per country remain key challenges for further research, which would also allow investigating less involved Potter readers and their assessments of the character.

Second, even accurate translation procedures could not completely eliminate culture-specific response biases (i.e. that collectivistic cultures tend to give higher ratings per se although they mean only a medium level) which can lead to a distortion of the results. Finally, while the measurement of PSRs and the other concepts has overall worked quite well in both participating countries, there is space for improvement, as especially the scale for task attraction did not reach sufficient alpha-coefficients and should be revised in future studies.

From a programmatic perspective, future research should replicate and extend the reported results, and also expand the methodology applied to study global and culture-specific PSR processes. For instance, it would be interesting to conduct in-depth interviews with Harry Potter fans to learn more about the culture-specific readings of the novels (cf. Liebes and Katz, 1986). Particularly, future studies should also consider audience responses to the Potter films and video games, because the physical appearance component plays a more significant role for audiovisual media (e.g. Vorderer, 1996). For a further development of cross-cultural survey instruments, experiments with media characters should be conducted, containing a manipulation of the parasocially relevant attributes to face culturally induced response patterns and biases. Furthermore, character perception, admiration and homophily may serve as conceptual and empirical tools to compare the evolution of PSRs with media characters that are globally successful versus characters that are only successful within one specific culture. This way, the impact of culture may become better visible than within the present research design.

From the perspective of entertainment research, our study has demonstrated once more that PSR is a relevant and useful theoretical concept. The Harry Potter audience is only one example for the development of worldwide fan communities, with all members holding strong parasocial relationships with the protagonist. Our study suggests that characters who are complying with social expectations of different cultures are important

for the formation of transnational entertainment audiences. The concept of parasocial relationships is therefore fruitful for studies on individual-psychological responses to media characters, and also for theory-driven empirical research on cultural differences in audience responses to entertainment media. As the exchange of entertainment content has become an important part of international mass communication, a continuation of research on audience culture and PSRs is thus warranted to achieve a better theoretical understanding and empirical prediction of transcultural media preferences, media appreciation, and fandom.

Appendix: Items used in the questionnaire

Parasocial relationship

Harry Potter is like a good friend for me
I find Harry Potter likeable
I like Harry Potter a lot

Admiration/attraction

Social attraction

I admire Harry Potter for his character
I like the way Harry Potter is a lot
Sometimes I think I'd like to be like Harry Potter
Harry Potter could be a friend of mine
Harry Potter would fit in very well with my other friends

Task attraction

I always trust Harry Potter overcome any problems he faces
Sometimes I think Harry achieves everything he wants to
[It sometimes happens that I try to approach certain things like Harry Potter would do; deleted]

Homophily

Value homophily

Harry Potter has exactly the same ideals as me
Harry Potter likes just the same things as I do

Attitude homophily

The way Harry Potter is, is the way I am too
Harry Potter thinks just like I do
Harry Potter behaves towards other people just like I do

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- Algoe SB and Haidt J (2009) Witnessing excellence in action: The 'other-praising' emotions of elevation, gratitude, and admiration. *Journal of Positive Psychology* 4(2): 105–127.
- Baron A (1997) *Social Psychology*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bartlett FC (1932) *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beeden A and De Bruin J (2010) *The Office*. Articulations of national identity in television format adaption. *Television and New Media* 11(1): 3–19.
- Blakley J (2001) *Entertainment Goes Global: Mass Culture in a Transforming World*. Available at: www.learcenter.org/pdf/EntGlobal.pdf
- Eyal K and Cohen J (2006) When good friends say goodbye: A parasocial breakup study. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 50(3): 502–523.
- Eyal K and Rubin AM (2003) Viewer aggression and homophily, identification, and parasocial relationships with television characters. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 47(1): 77–98.
- Fisherkeller J (1997) Everyday learning about identities among young adolescents in television culture. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 28(4): 467–492.
- Fiske ST and Taylor SE (1991) *Social Cognition*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Forgas JP (1983) What is social about social cognition? *British Journal of Social Psychology* 22: 129–144.
- Giles D (2002) Parasocial interaction: A review of the literature and a model for future research. *Media Psychology* 4(3): 279–305.
- Gleich U (1996) Sind Fernsehpersonen die 'Freunde' des Zuschauers? Ein Vergleich zwischen parasozialen und realen sozialen Beziehungen [Are media figures 'friends' of the viewers? A comparison between parasocial and real social relationships]. In: Vorderer P (ed.) *Fernsehen als 'Beziehungskiste': Parasoziale Beziehungen und Interaktionen mit TV-Personen*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 113–144.
- Gudykunst WB and Lee C (2003) Cross-cultural communication theories. In: Gudykunst WB (ed.) *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 25–50.
- Harkness J (2003) Questionnaire translation. In: Harkness J, Van de Vijver F and Mohler PP (eds) *Cross-Cultural Survey Methods*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 35–56.
- Hartmann T, Schramm H and Klimmt C (2004) Personenorientierte Medienrezeption: Ein Zwei-Ebenen-Modell parasozialer Interaktionen [Person-oriented media reception: A two-level model of parasocial interactions]. *Publizistik* 49(1): 25–47.
- Hartmann T, Stuke D and Daschmann G (2008) Positive parasocial relationships with drivers affect suspense in racing sport. *Journal of Media Psychology* 20(1): 24–34.
- Havens T (2000) The biggest show in the world: Race and the global popularity of *The Cosby Show*. *Media, Culture and Society* 22(4): 371–391.
- Hoffner C (1996) Children's wishful identification and parasocial interaction with favorite television characters. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 40(3): 389–402.
- Hoffner C and Buchanan M (2005) Young adults' wishful identification with television characters: The role of perceived similarity and character attributes. *Media Psychology* 7(4): 325–351.

- Hoffner C and Cantor J (1991) Perceiving and responding to mass media characters. In: Bryant J and Zillmann D (eds) *Responding to the Screen: Reception and Reaction Processes*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 63–101.
- Hofstede G (2001) *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hofstede G (2004) Business cultures. In: Jandt FE (ed.) *Intercultural Communication: A Global Reader*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 8–12.
- Hoorn JF and Konijn EA (2003) Perceiving and experiencing fictional characters: An integrative account. *Japanese Psychological Research* 45(4): 250–268.
- Horton D and Wohl RR (1956) Mass communication and parasocial interaction: Observation on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry* 19(3): 185–206.
- IP. (2008) *Television 2008. International Key Facts*. Wiesbaden: Media Daten Verlag.
- Katz E and Foulkes D (1962) On the use of mass media for escape: Clarification of a concept. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 26(3): 377–388.
- Kim H and Markus HR (1999) Deviance or uniqueness, harmony or conformity? A cultural analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77(4): 785–800.
- Kim U (1994) Individualism and collectivism: Conceptual clarification and elaboration. In: Kim U, Triandis HC, Kagitcibasi C, Choi S-C and Yoon G (eds) *Individualism and Collectivism: Theory, Method, and Applications*, Vol. 18, Cross-Cultural Research and Methodology Series. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 19–40.
- Klimmt C, Hartmann T and Schramm H (2006) Parasocial interactions and relationships. In: Bryant J and Vorderer P (eds) *Psychology of Entertainment*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 291–313.
- Liebes T (1988) Cultural differences in the retelling of television fiction. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5(4): 277–292.
- Liebes T and Katz E (1986) Patterns of involvement in television fiction: A comparative analysis. *European Journal of Communication* 1(2): 151–171.
- Liebes T and Katz E (1993) *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of Dallas*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Lonner WJ and Berry JW (eds) (1986) *Field Methods in Cross-Cultural Research*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- McCroskey JC and McCain TA (1974) The measurement of interpersonal attraction. *Speech Monographs* 41: 261–266.
- McCroskey JC, Richmond VP and Daly JA (1975) The development of a measure of perceived homophily in interpersonal communication. *Human Communication Research* 1(4): 323–332.
- Markus H and Kitayama S (1991) Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion and motivation. *Psychological Review* 98(2): 224–253.
- Matsumoto D (2004) The role of individualism-collectivism in future cross-cultural research. *Cross-Cultural Psychology Bulletin* 38(3): 10–18.
- Matsumoto D and Juang L (2004) *Culture and Psychology*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson.
- Nabi RL, Biely EN, Morgan SJ and Stitt CR (2003) Reality-based TV programming and the psychology of its appeal. *Media Psychology* 5(4): 303–330.
- Nisbett RE, Peng K, Choi I and Norenzayan A (2001) Culture and systems of thought: Holistic versus analytic cognition. *Psychological Review* 108(2): 291–310.

- Oyserman D, Coon HM and Kimmelmeier M (2002) Rethinking individualism and collectivism: Evaluation of theoretical assumptions and meta-analyses. *Psychological Bulletin* 128(1): 3–72.
- Palmer MT and Barnett GA (1984) Using a spatial model to verify language translation. In: Gudykunst WB and Kim YY (eds) *Methods for Intercultural Communication Research: International and Intercultural Communication Annual Volume VIII*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 129–146.
- Perse EM and Rubin RB (1989) Attribution in social and parasocial relationships. *Communication Research* 16(1): 59–77.
- Rubin RB and McHugh MP (1987) Development of parasocial interaction relationships. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 31(3): 279–292.
- Schramm H and Hartmann T (2008) The PSI-Process Scales: A new measure to assess the intensity and breadth of parasocial processes. *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research* 33(4): 385–401.
- Smith PB and Bond MH (1998) *Social Psychology across Cultures*. Harlow: Prentice Hall.
- Straubhaar JD (1991) Beyond media imperialism: Asymmetrical interdependence and cultural proximity. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8(5): 39–59.
- Trepte S (2008) Cultural proximity in TV entertainment: An eight-country study on the relationship of nationality and the evaluation of US prime-time fiction. *Communications. The European Journal of Communication* 33(1): 1–26.
- Triandis HC (1995) *Individualism and Collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Triandis HC and Suh EM (2002) Cultural influences on personality. *Annual Review of Psychology* 53: 133–160.
- Triandis HC, McCusker C and Hui CH (1990) Multi-method probes of individualism-collectivism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59(5): 1006–1020.
- Turner JR (1993) Interpersonal and psychological predictors of parasocial interaction with different television performers. *Communication Quarterly* 41(4): 443–453.
- Visscher A and Vorderer P (1998) Freunde in guten und schlechten Zeiten. Parasoziale Beziehungen von Vielsehern zu Charakteren einer Daily Soap. In: Willems H and Jurga M (eds) *Inszenierungsgesellschaft* [Stage Society]. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 453–469.
- Vorderer P (1996) Picard, Brinkmann, Derrick und Co. Als Freunde der Zuschauer. Eine explorative Studie über parasoziale Beziehungen zu Serienfiguren. In: Vorderer P (ed.) *Fernsehen als Beziehungskiste* [Television as 'Relationship Box']. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 153–171.
- Vorderer P and Knobloch S (1996) Parasoziale Beziehungen zu Serienfiguren: Ergänzung oder Ersatz? [Parasocial relationships to characters of TV series: Completion or replacement?] *Medienpsychologie* 8(3): 201–216.
- Vorderer P, Klimmt C and Ritterfeld U (2004) Enjoyment: At the heart of media entertainment. *Communication Theory* 14(4): 388–408.