Do Representations of Attachment to Romantic Partners in Emerging Adulthood Influence Attitudes about and Perceptions of The Twilight Saga?

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Authors’ Note

NOT FOR CITATION. This paper presents a preliminary analysis of our data for purposes of presentation to the 5th Conference on Emerging Adulthood in Providence, Rhode Island, October 2011.

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Abstract

Given the predominant themes of love and obsession in The Twilight Saga, an online survey was completed by 243 females from three different locations assessing both expertise/exposure to the books and/or movies and their reactions to the characters. Representation of real-life attachment to romantic partners was also assessed via The Experiences in Close Relationship Inventory—Revised (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). Variables indicating higher levels of expertise were consistently related to higher levels of attachment Anxiety, but not attachment Avoidance, although participants with lower levels of both Anxiety and Avoidance reported being influenced by the characters in similar ways.
Representations of Attachment and THE TWILIGHT SAGA

Do Representations of Attachment to Romantic Partners in Emerging Adulthood Influence Attitudes about and Perceptions of The Twilight Saga?

Since the release of her initial book in 2005, Stephanie Myers’ Twilight Saga has sold more than 70 million copies worldwide. As each novel chronicling the love triangle of the human adolescent, Bella, the ageless vampire, Edward and the (literally) “hot” werewolf, Jacob, have subsequently been translated into film, each opened to tremendous international box office (if not critical) success. Additionally, numerous websites, blogs, fan-fiction stories, and YouTube tributes and parodies have contributed to the immense popularity of the series, particularly among adolescent and young adult audiences. Our study of the representations of attachment to romantic partners in real life and the perceptions held by female fans of Twilight of each fictional character contributes to the growing understanding of the role of media in the lives of emerging adults and the extent to which investment in the Saga has influenced the lives of these young women.

Research has long established that two individuals can perceive and understand a situation in very different ways, as has been demonstrated using simple visual and auditory stimuli (e.g., visual and auditory illusions) as well as with more complex stimuli (e.g., a written story or film). Contemporary moral research has focused on evaluating the effectiveness of using literature and film for moral education (e.g., Leming, 2000; Lindsay, 1996) and on developmental differences in moral perceptions of texts (e.g., Senland & Vozzola, 2007). Using a modified version of Narvaez’s (2001) Rating Ethical Content Scale, Whitney, Vozzola, and Hoffman (2005) examined influence of age/education, expertise, and gender on readers’ moral understandings of themes and characters in the Harry Potter book series. Findings indicated older, more educated readers were able to perceive a more complex view of moral sensitivity, action, motivation and judgment among characters, validating Narvaez’s contention that understanding of moral text is mediated by expertise and moral scheme. Like the Potter books, the Twilight Saga has been heavily marketed and consumed as both text and film. Carr (2006) contends that technological advances have shifted the manner in which we learn information about humankind away from books and toward other forms of media such as cinema and television. Glover and her colleagues have examined moral messages in television and film for several years—particularly with the use of the Media’s Moral Messages rating scale (Glover, Garmon, & Hull, 2011)—providing evidence of both positive and negative messages present in programming as well as identifying predictor variables to explain variation in subjects’ perceptions of each. In the current study, we examine both an individual’s perception of the media event known as The Twilight Saga but also possible predictors of how much exposure they will choose to have.

Media Theory Background

Moving beyond older social learning theories in which media characters are viewed as role models, or cultivation theories in which media interactions shape or “cultivate” individual worldviews to match the media worldview, the Uses and Gratification Approach (Rubin, 1994) proposes people should be viewed as active consumers of media. In this approach, individual differences are perceived as guiding each of us in making different choices about the type and amount of media we consume and the manner in which we respond to it. Arnett (1995) proposes media serve five basic uses for the adolescent: entertainment, identify formation, high sensation, coping, and youth culture identification. Further, with specific regard to identity formation, research findings have demonstrated media might be particularly influential in the development of sexual and romantic scripts (Brown, Steele, & Walsh-Childers, 2002).

Another area of research in media psychology—Parasocial Interactions—has been integrated with the Uses and Gratification Approach by some theorist (Klimmt et al., 2006; Rubin, 1994). Since its introduction in 1956 by Horton and Wohl, the concept of parasocial interaction has served as the foundation for an ever-growing body of literature examining the one-sided relationship, or attachment bond, viewers have with media personalities. Although this research has traditionally focused on fictional television characters due to the repeated nature of viewers’ exposure to characters, more recently it has been broadened to include characters represented in other forms of media, particularly those involving the internet (Klimmt et al., 2006).

Defined as a normative process of “interpersonal involvement with media personality” (Cole & Leets, 1999, p. 496), parasocial relationships appear to reflect the degree to which an individual emotionally connects to fictional media personae and embraces any presentation of that character. Additionally, Klimmt et al. (2006) argue that the stronger a parasocial relationship an individual has with a specific media persona, the more motivated the individual will be to consume media experiences involving that persona. Consequently, we assume parasocial interactions can develop and be strengthened by a multi-media phenomenon such as the Twilight Saga.
Although it was originally argued parasocial relationships develop as a substitute for unmet relationships needs, subsequent research has failed to support this assumption (Greenwood & Long, 1999; Cohen, 2004). At minimum these interactions may be viewed as an extension of real-life social relationships in that individuals who appear to have difficulties with social relationships due to a lack of ability to relate to the feelings of another or because they are extremely shy also appear to have difficulties developing similar relationships with fictional television characters (Cohen, 2004).

Of particular interest to the current study, researchers have also examined the existence of parasocial interactions by incorporating measures of attachment representations. Cohen (2004) has demonstrated adult models of attachment formed through childhood experiences with the primary caregiver may be associated not only with one’s romantic relationships in adulthood but also with imagined relationships. The use of attachment models is now commonly accepted as a methodology for examining questions raised by the existence of parasocial interactions (Cohen, 2004; Greenwood, Pietromonaco, & Long, 2008; Gardner & Knowles, 2008; Cole & Leets, 1999). Greenwood’s work (e.g., 2008) suggests that media involvement may be mediated by psychosocial functioning variables such as self-esteem, level of parasocial interaction (PSI) [an imagined friendship with a media personality in which viewers feel like they know that character and develop an attachment to them], tendency to transportation (“...the flow-like experience of emotional, perceptual and cognitive absorption into a narrative, which incorporates feelings of empathic identification with characters,” p. 415), and attachment anxiety/avoidance. In a correlational study of psychological predictors of media involvement, she found that attachment anxiety predicted increased transportation tendencies and increased TV viewing hours predicted greater parasocial involvement with favorite characters.

Representations of Attachment to Romantic Partners

The assessment of attachment beyond early childhood involves two broad traditions of theory and research (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998; Simpson & Rholes, 1998; Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 1999). Both argue the internal working models of attachment developed during infancy continue to influence attachment relationships into adulthood, but each approach constructs attachment differently – both in terms of the type of relationship dyad examined and the methodology used in assessment. One approach is based on psychodynamic theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) and continues to focus on parental relationships that occurred during childhood. The second, based on the work of Hazen and Shaver (1987), relies heavily on personal and social psychology and incorporates attachment relationships beyond those with parents, such as relationships to peers and romantic partners. This latter approach relies on a continuous measure of attachment anxiety and a second of attachment avoidance, resulting in a more sensitive measure of adult attachment (Collins & Read, 1990) that reflects the extent to which each is represented within the adult’s working model of attachment (Fraley & Waller, 1998). Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) describe the variable of 1) Avoidance as reflecting discomfort with closeness and discomfort depending on others, and 2) Anxiety as reflecting fear of rejection and abandonment. The current study expands upon previous research examining parasocial interactions and attachment security by exploring both the multi-media phenomenon (e.g., novels, films, etc.) of the Twilight Saga and possible interactions between representations of interpersonal attachment, the extent of self-selected exposure of participants to Twilight, and the individual’s perception of moral themes embedded in the Saga as well as the moral complexity of its fictional characters.

HYPOTHESES

H1) Most Emerging Adults will be familiar with The Twilight Saga
   • H1a) The majority of Emerging Adults in this study will have been exposed to at least one book from the The Twilight Saga
   • H1b) The majority of Emerging Adults in this study will have been exposed to at least one movie from the The Twilight Saga
   • H1c) If the Emerging Adult was exposed to The Twilight Saga in only one format, that format is most likely to be the movie, rather than the book

H2) Representations of Attachment to Romantic Partners will be related to The Twilight Saga
   • H2a) Emerging Adults evidencing higher Anxiety scores will report more exposure to the Saga
   • H2b) Emerging Adults evidencing higher Avoidance scores will report more exposure to the Saga
Subjects
Data was collected from three areas in the United States – the Northeast, Southwest, and MidAtlantic. Participants for the study initially included 259 females and 32 males (n = 291), ranging in age from 18 to 52 years (M = 22.18). A review of the demographics of the population indicated that of the 32 males who participated in the study, 17 indicated they had not read any of the novels included in the Twilight Saga or watched either of the films available at the time of data collection. Further, of the remaining 15 males, the majority had not read any of the novels and had watched only one of the films. In contrast, of the 259 females, only 44 reported they had not been exposed to any novels or films, and the females who had been exposed reported they had read the novels and watched the films multiple times. In that exposure to the Twilight Saga differed so dramatically between the two genders and there was an insufficient number of males to support most planned statistical analyses involving gender, male participants were removed from the study. Further, of the 259 female participants, 88% were 18 to 25 years of age, the age range defined by Arnett (2004) as characterizing “emerging adulthood.” Consequently, in order to capture participants in a common developmental period, only emerging adults were included in the study, resulting in a total of 228 female participants (mean age 20.69 years).

Of these participants, 55 were from the Northeast sample, 85 from the Southwest, and 88 indicated they lived in the MidAtlantic region of the US. Additionally, 97.4% indicated they were currently enrolled in an undergraduate program at a 4-year university, and 96.1% indicated they had never been married. In addition, 69.3% of participants indicated their race as Non-Latino White, 8.8% as African-American, and 9.2% Hispanic-American.

Measures
Adult attachment. Participants completed the Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised (ECR-R; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) as a measure of attachment in their romantic partnerships. The ECR-R is a 36-item self-report questionnaire wherein participants are asked to respond to items assessing their level of emotional intimacy in relationships using a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = “strongly disagree” and 7 = “strongly agree.” Two continuous scores ranging from 18 to 126 were calculated, one for attachment avoidance (or discomfort with closeness and discomfort depending on others) and the other for attachment anxiety (or fear of rejection and abandonment). Higher scores on each are indicative of greater avoidance and/or anxiety and the “less desirable” representation of an attachment relationship.

Demographic questionnaire. In addition to sex, age, level of education, marital status, and location, other demographic data included participants’ romantic relationship experiences as well as involvement with characters and issues in the Twilight Saga. Frequency of reading the books and watching the movies, important themes detected (e.g., love, courage, meanness, etc.), and relationship preference (e.g., Team Edward vs. Team Jacob) were included on the demographic questionnaire. Finally, participants were also asked to indicate the extent to which the Saga had influenced their view of relationships by checking one of the following: 1) “It’s unrealistic. The level of love and commitment in Bella and Edwards’s relationship is unattainable in real life,” 2) “No real influence at all. This is all just fantasy,” 3) “I often found myself fantasizing about having a relationship with one of the main characters,” and 4) “It has shown me the type of true love and strong commitment I would like to have in my own romantic relationships.”

Twilight exposure. Exposure to the Twilight Saga was assessed using a continuous score summing the number of times participants had either read one of the four books included in the Saga or watched one of the two films that had been released at the time of data collection (i.e., Twilight, New Moon). In addition, participants were categorized into three exposure groups created using the mean scores for the number of times participants reported reading any of the books (i.e., book fan) and for number of times they reported seeing either of the two films (i.e., movie fan). A total of 37 participants indicated they had not read any of the books nor seen either movie (i.e., the no fan group), while self-reports from 58 participants yielded both book fan and movie fan scores exceeding the sample means (i.e., above average). The remaining 133 participants were categorized as average fans in that their book fan and/or movie fan scores were considered to be not different from the overall mean.
Results

- Exposure to the Twilight Saga was high among Female Emerging Adults
  - Very high in exposure to both books and movies
  - Slightly higher in exposure to book-only than to movie only

Hypothesis 1:
Previous Exposure to The Twilight Saga (combining Exposure to Books and Movies)

- Above-Average: 26%
- None: 16%
- Low-Average: 58%

Hypothesis 1:
Type of Exposure to The Twilight Saga

- Both Book and Movie: 79%
- None: 16%
- Book Only: 5%
- Movie Only: 0%
Representations of Attachment to Romantic Partners is related to *The Twilight Saga*

- But only for Attachment Anxiety, not Attachment Avoidance
- May be primarily due to influence of exposure to books, not movies

### Hypothesis 2:
**Representation of Attachment by Level of Exposure Groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Low-Average</th>
<th>Above-Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anxiety</strong> Attachment: $F(2, 225) = 5.423 \ (p = .005)$</td>
<td>49.05</td>
<td>55.03</td>
<td>63.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Avoidance</strong> Attachment: NS</td>
<td>50.27</td>
<td>48.50</td>
<td>51.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representation of Attachment to Romantic Partners</th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
<th>Number of Previous Romantic Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Previous Romantic Relationships</td>
<td>-.285(^a)</td>
<td>-.340(^a)</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$p &lt; .001$</td>
<td>$p &lt; .001$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Exposure to <em>Twilight Saga</em></td>
<td>.172(^b)</td>
<td>.015(^b)</td>
<td>.110(^c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$p = .018$</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Exposure to <em>Twilight Saga</em></td>
<td>.160(^b)</td>
<td>.024(^b)</td>
<td>.090(^c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$p = .027$</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movie Exposure to <em>Twilight Saga</em></td>
<td>.124(^b)</td>
<td>-.002(^b)</td>
<td>.096(^c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$NS$</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NS</td>
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\(^{a}N = 227, {b}N = 191, {c}N = 190\)
The self-reported influence of *The Twilight Saga* varied considerably.

- Most common response was “No Influence”
- Self-reported influence was related to Representations of Attachment (consistently for both Anxiety and Avoidance)

### Which statement best describes the Influence of the Twilight Saga on your life?

1. **No real influence at all. This is all just fantasy**
   - 44.44%
2. **It’s unrealistic. The level of love and commitment in Bella and Edward’s relationships is unattainable in real life**
   - 13.23%
3. **It has shown me the type of true love and strong commitment I would like to have in my own romantic relationship.**
   - 31.22%
4. **I often found myself fantasizing about having a relationship with one of the main characters**
   - 11.11%

### Self-Reported Influence of The Twilight Saga and Representations of Attachment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Anxiety Attachment</th>
<th>Avoidance Attachment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) No real influence at all. This is all just fantasy</td>
<td>52.7738</td>
<td>48.8571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) It’s unrealistic. The level of love and commitment in Bella and Edward’s relationships is unattainable in real life</td>
<td>65.8800</td>
<td>54.6800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) It has shown me the type of true love and strong commitment I would like to have in my own romantic relationship.</td>
<td>55.9661</td>
<td>44.1864</td>
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<tr>
<td>4) I often found myself fantasizing about having a relationship with one of the main characters</td>
<td>70.4762</td>
<td>59.5238</td>
</tr>
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- **Anxiety Attachment:** $F(3, 185) = 5.443$ ($p < .001$)
- **Avoidance Attachment:** $F(3, 185) = 3.887$ ($p = .010$)
Most respondents did care about the fictional relationships (Team Edward)

Discussion

- *The Twilight Saga* is popular with Emerging Adults, both books and movies
- Representations of Attachment to Romantic Partners is related to the level of self-selected exposure to *The Twilight Saga*
  - But only for Anxiety, not Avoidance attachment
  - Primarily for Book Exposure, not Movie Exposure
- Largest group report using *The Twilight Saga* for entertainment purposes
- Scores representing both forms of attachment insecurity were consistently related to self-reported usage of *The Twilight Saga* in real life (possibly reflecting Arnett’s Potential Uses of Media)
References


