Pessimism and Anxiety: Effects of Tween Sitcoms on Expectations and Feelings About Peer Relationships in School

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Pessimism and Anxiety: Effects of Tween Sitcoms on Expectations and Feelings About Peer Relationships in School

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Television programs for tweens (roughly 8–14 year olds) offer glimpses of life in high school, often depicting prototypical crowds (e.g., jocks and populars) and various forms of interpersonal hostility. Fifth graders (N = 97) were randomly assigned to watch a tween television episode that was high or low in social conflict (two exemplars at each level) and then answered questions about their future middle school and their habitual exposure to tween television programs. Consistent with predictions afforded by the General Aggression Model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002), habitual exposure was associated with expectations of encountering specific crowds in middle school (person schemata), with expectations of less friendliness and more bullying (behavioral scripts), and with greater anxiety about attending their future school. Similarly, those who saw high-conflict episodes anticipated more hostility and less friendliness in their future school and felt more anxious and less positive about going there than those who saw low-conflict episodes (effects that were partly mediated by perceptions of character hostility). There were also significant

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interactions between habitual and experimental exposure: Participants who did not habitually watch tween programs and who saw a high-conflict episode resembled habitual viewers in their lowered expectations of friendliness and heightened expectations of hostility.

One relatively recent phenomenon is the popularity of movies and television programs set in high school, targeted not at high school students themselves, but at younger, preadolescent audiences. Industry publications note the lucrative popularity of teen characters among preteen viewers—over 3 million 6–11 year olds watched *High School Musical* when it premiered on The Disney Channel and over 6 million watched the premiere of the first sequel (Romano, 2008). Hannah Montana, Carly, Victoria, and the Russo twins of Waverly Place find their sizable audiences primarily among elementary school viewers, not in the adolescent age group they depict (Becker 2004; Levin, 2007; Romano, 2008).

One noteworthy characteristic of such content is the degree to which the plot and humor reside in depictions of high school students engaging in hostile interactions, often embedded in prototypical social crowds such as jocks, populars, and nerds. The central question of this article is whether such depictions contribute to elementary school children’s beliefs and feelings about typical social interactions and configurations in middle school.

The possibility that popular media depictions shape children’s attitudes toward school is of social significance in itself. In addition, as we argue further, the topic provides a setting in which to examine components of Anderson and Bushman’s (2002) General Aggression Model, specifically the effects of depicted hostility on children’s scripts, schemata, and affective linkages.

**DEPICTING SCHOOL LIFE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES**

Romano (2004, 2008) has described the conscious attempts by executives at Disney and Nickelodeon channels to appeal to advertisers by offering tweens (8–12 year olds in some industry accounts; 9–14 year olds in others; Levin, 2007) as a distinct, enthusiastic audience with surprisingly high discretionary income. Further, she argues that in order to generate high ratings with this audience, the explicit strategy adopted by executives at both channels has been to create films and television series featuring older teen characters with aspirational appeal for young viewers. One byproduct of such a strategy is that the stories revolve around interactions between middle school or high school students, often in school itself.

Cultural studies scholars have described the key tropes of high-school films produced since the 1980s, and recent accounts have noted the preva-
lence of these tropes on television as well (Franzini, 2008; Lee, 2010; Shary, 2002). For example, Kaveney (2006) wrote about the “anthropology shot” in film and television depictions of high school, in which the camera pans across tables of students in the cafeteria to highlight the divisions between social crowds (which, she pointed out, are enumerated in Ferris Bueller’s Day Off as “Sportos, motorheads, geeks, sluts, pinheads, dweebies, wonkers, richies” p. 45). Similarly, Northup and Liebler (2010) reported that female characters in Nickelodeon and Disney tween sitcoms tend to be physically typecast into social groups such as valley girl, girl next door, brainy, and goth/alternative and to exchange comments about each others’ body size and appearance.

In addition to these themes of social division, content analyses indicate the regular depiction of direct and indirect aggression in television programs popular with tween audiences, including shows specifically targeted toward tweens. As described by Archer and Coyne (2005) indirect aggression (closely tied to the concepts of relational or social aggression) involves intentionally harming someone’s social standing by manipulative acts such as gossiping, spreading rumors, or exclusion. Such acts are intended to inflict emotional pain, yet, mostly, avoid direct confrontation (hence, the name). In contrast, direct aggression includes physical acts such as pushing, hitting, or tripping, but may also take the form of overt verbal attacks such as put downs, slurs, and threats. Our interest, in the current study, lies in the effects on young audiences of seeing the spectrum of such hostile acts as part of their exposure to depictions of high school.

Coyne and Archer (2004) studied programs popular with 11–14 year olds in the United Kingdom and reported approximately nine acts per hour of indirect aggression (e.g., gossiping, spreading rumors, ignoring, dirty looks) and roughly six acts per hour of direct verbal aggression (e.g., yelling or arguing, name calling, insulting). These nonphysical forms of aggression were more prevalent than physical aggression (roughly three acts per hour), and unlike physical aggression, tended to be shown as both realistic and justified. In the United States, Linder and Gentile (2009) examined the favorite television programs of a sample of fifth-grade girls (a subset of which were tween television programs). They reported roughly four acts of indirect aggression and three acts of verbal aggression per hour.2

One might wonder whether such depictions are simply representations of an unfortunate reality. After all, considerable evidence suggests that aggression and interpersonal hostility peak in pre- and early adolescence (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Gillessen & Mayeaux, 2004; Pepler, Craig, Connolly, Yuile, McMaster, & Jiang, 2006). However, there is some indication that television overrepresents levels of social conflict even for adolescents. In a study by Coyne, Archer, and Eslea (2006), a sample of British 11–15 year olds reported witnessing or hearing about 50 acts of aggression in school per week, of which 33 were acts of indirect aggression. Although this is
depressingly high, the authors noted that, given students' reports about their levels of viewing and the content of what they were watching, as indicated by an earlier content analysis (Coyne & Archer, 2004), students probably saw over 300 acts of indirect aggression on television per week—roughly 10 times as many as in their real lives at school. Thus, the programs watched by tweens appear to distort and exaggerate features of real life, representing them as more prevalent and extreme.

**DEPICTED HOSTILITY AND CHILDREN'S SOCIAL BEHAVIORS**

Prior research on the effects of such depictions has focused on young viewers' social interactions. For example, Coyne and Archer (2005) surveyed 11–14 year olds in England and found that the levels of indirect aggression in each student's favorite television programs predicted the number of classmates who nominated that student as engaging in indirect aggression when angered. In a similar study in the United States, Linder and Gentile (2009) found that teachers' reports of fifth-grade girls' levels of indirect and verbal aggression were predicted by the frequency with which such behaviors appeared in each girl's favorite television programs. Martins and Wilson (2012) surveyed U.S. children in grades K through 5, and found that girls' (but not boys') exposure to social aggression on television (i.e., nonphysical direct and indirect aggression) predicted their self-reported tendency to engage in such behaviors in school.

In an experimental study, Coyne, Archer, and Eslea (2004) randomly assigned 11–14 year olds to watch videos that varied in levels of direct confrontation versus indirect aggression. Afterwards, the students were given a chance to retaliate against an irritating adult male confederate. Those who watched either form of aggression gave the irritating confederate lower evaluations and recommended he receive less pay than those who saw the control video. (See Coyne et al., 2008, for similar results in an experiment with adults.)

All three sets of researchers (e.g., Coyne & Archer, 2005, Linder & Gentile, 2009; Martins & Wilson, 2012) have explained these effects in terms of Huesmann's Information Processing theory (Bushman & Huesmann, 2001; Huesmann, 1988). Specifically, they suggested that young viewers acquire negative scripts for social behaviors by observing televised models of interpersonal hostility. These scripts then alter appraisals of related situations and guide behavior. As Linder and Gentile (2009) put it, children learn that such behavior is “normative, acceptable, and a useful way to solve social problems” (p. 288).

This account fits with theorizing and research about the role of social information processing styles in children's aggression (e.g., Crick & Dodge,
Effects of Tween Sitcoms

1994; Dodge & Crick, 1990). For example, Crick and Dodge (1996) examined the degree to which children's patterns of aggression were predicted by their tendency to display hostile attribution biases in ambiguous situations, their expectations about the outcomes of aggression, and their self-efficacy about committing aggressive acts, all of which could potentially be affected by media depictions. In the first explicit test of such connections, Gentile, Coyne, and Walsh (2011) followed 430 third- and fifth-grade students over a six-month period and found that media violence exposure significantly predicted children's tendency to make hostile attributions about ambiguous relational and physical scenarios. Moreover, boys' hostile attribution biases about physical scenarios mediated their increases in physical aggression over the six months of the study; girls' hostile attributions about relational scenarios mediated their increases in relational aggression.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Like prior researchers, we consider it likely that depictions of conflict contribute to young viewers' beliefs about normative social interactions. Our focus is specifically on students' scripts about social interactions in school and their feelings about going there. We examined the effects of depicted conflict as expressed in a mix of indirect, direct verbal, and physical aggression (which is how it typically occurs in tween television episodes).

We found it useful to employ the somewhat broader framework of the General Aggression Model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002), which incorporates many of the elements of Huesmann's Information Processing theory. The model proposes that media-based experiences contribute to knowledge structures, including person schemata (i.e., typical characteristics of people or groups of people) and behavioral scripts (how those people behave in given situations). Further, the model suggests that these knowledge structures can contain links to affective states evoked by the initial experience (e.g., anger, fear) and information about what emotions are typical or appropriate in a given situation. When activated, these interconnected components (person schemata, behavioral scripts, affect, and affective knowledge) may then interact with other factors (personality, values, long term goals, etc.) to influence people's appraisals and reactions.

What does it take to produce such effects? The model proposes that even one or two script rehearsals can be sufficient for learning (see also Bushman & Huesmann, 2006), but that frequent rehearsal (such as might result from repeated exposure to media depictions) leads to more accessible scripts and schema, with stronger links between the various components and more connections with other concepts in memory.

Consider how the General Aggression Model might apply to the effects of popular media depictions of school life. To the extent that films and
television programs feature repeated presentations of groups of students in conflict, the model suggests that viewers of such content would come to expect the presence of such cliques or crowds (person schemata) and to anticipate hostile, manipulative interactions between them (behavioral scripts), particularly if those viewers lacked rival knowledge structures from other sources such as an older sibling or friend already at that school. Given this, middle school might reasonably be linked to even greater feelings of anxiety and stress than would otherwise be associated with the transition.

In the current study, fifth graders who were rapidly approaching the transition to middle school were randomly assigned to see episodes of tween sitcoms that were either high or low in depictions of hostile interactions between groups of students in school. Afterward, the children were asked about their future middle school—what they had heard about it, what social groups they expected to encounter there, how they thought students interacted, and the extent of bullying. They also indicated how they felt about going there. We then asked about their evaluations of the content (e.g., how mean the characters were, how funny) and, finally, we measured how often they watched specific tween sitcoms that repeatedly depicted life in school.

Predicting Effects of Habitual and Experimental Exposure

Based on the General Aggression Model, we expected that those who watched tween programs regularly would expect to encounter social crowds that are often referenced and stereotyped in such content. In addition to effects of habitual exposure, we expected that there would be effects of experimental condition. That is, those who saw an episode depicting conflict between stereotyped social groups in school would be more likely to mention such groups when discussing their own future middle school. We also expected that the effect of condition might be stronger for light viewers, rather than for heavy viewers, because the latter would already have information about such groups chronically accessible. The hypotheses about expectations of groups were:

H1a: There will be a positive relationship between habitual tween television viewing and expectations of stereotypical groups in middle school.

H1b: Those who see a high-conflict episode (relative to those who see a low-conflict episode) will expect more stereotypical groups.

H1c: The effects of conflict condition will be stronger for light viewers than for heavy viewers.

Based on the same reasoning, we hypothesized that habitual and experimental exposure to tween sitcoms would contribute to young viewers’ behavioral scripts. Those who saw high-conflict scenes (as opposed to low-conflict scenes) or those who habitually watched tween sitcoms would an-
Effects of Tween Sitcoms

ticipate more bullying, as well as greater frequency of hostility as opposed to friendliness at their future middle school. We also predicted an interaction, such that light viewers might vary more substantially between the two conflict conditions than heavy viewers, who might be more chronically pessimistic. The hypotheses about expectations of peer relationships were:

H2a: Habitual exposure to tween television will be associated with expectations of more hostility and bullying and less friendliness in middle school.
H2b: Those who see a high-conflict episode (relative to those who see a low-conflict episode) will expect more hostility and bullying and less friendliness.
H2c: The effects of conflict condition will be stronger for light viewers than for heavy viewers.

Given the above hypotheses about expectations of social groups, bullying, and interpersonal hostility, we anticipated that habitual viewers of tween programming or those who watched high-conflict episodes would report more feelings of anxiety and fewer positive feelings about their move to middle school, and that there would be the same type of interaction between habitual and experimental exposure. The hypotheses about students’ affect about middle school were:

H3a: Habitual tween television viewing will be associated with higher scores for negative feelings and lower scores for positive feelings about middle school.
H3b: Those who see a high-conflict episode (relative to those who see a low-conflict episode) will score higher on negative feelings and lower on positive feelings.
H3c: The effects of conflict condition will be stronger for light viewers than for heavy viewers.

Role of Viewer Interpretations of the Episodes

Thus far, our argument is rather straightforward—depictions of school affect future students’ expectations and feelings; negative depictions produce negative expectations and feelings. However, it is worth noting that the two programs from which we selected our episodes were designed to be comedic and entertaining (as is the majority of the tween lineup on Nickelodeon and Disney channels). Indeed, the popularity of such programs suggests that there are considerable pleasures associated with viewing.

One real possibility, then, is that young viewers perceive the actions and comments in tween programming differently than would be suggested by critical or quantitative content analyses. Perhaps for some (or even most?)
members of the target audience, the depicted insults, slurs, and threats are not seen as mean and hostile but as a form of inoffensive, ritualized banter for humorous effect. In such cases, we might not expect that viewing such content would lead to anxiety and perceptions that students will be intentionally hurtful to each other (although it might still lead to imitation of the depicted behaviors). On the contrary, one could even predict positive effects on expectations (“Middle school will be hilarious!”) and on affective associations (pleasure, amusement). Thus, it was only to the extent that participants perceived the depicted interactions to be hostile, as opposed to friendly, that we anticipated negative effects on their feelings and predictions about school climate. The prediction was:

H4: The predicted negative effects of exposure to high-conflict (as opposed to low-conflict) episodes will be mediated by perceptions of character hostility.

An additional possibility is that some participants may find the episode humorous while at the same time evaluating the interactions as mean-spirited or aggressive. Past research suggests that humor reduces the number of counterarguments generated against a message and increases attention to and liking of the message source (e.g., Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, & Byrne, 2007; see Weinberger & Gulas, 1992, for a review of early research). For example, M. R. Brown, Bhadury, and Pope (2010) reported that the use of comedic violence in television ads elicited greater involvement with the ad message and better retention of the brand information. This suggests that those who perceived hostility and found the episode humorous would show the strongest negative effects, because their higher level of involvement would make them less likely to counterargue (for example) the plausibility and relevance of such interactions to their own lives. Those who did not perceive hostility should be relatively optimistic about middle school, regardless of how humorous they perceived the episode to be.

H5: There will be an interaction between ratings of character hostility and ratings of episode humor, such that the combination of high levels of both will be associated with the most negative predictions and feelings about school.

METHOD

Participants
A total of 97 fifth-grade students ($M_{\text{age}} = 10.8$ years, $SD = .43$) participated during the late spring or summer of 2009. For all of them, this was a period
of transition from their last year of elementary school to their first year of middle school. The sample was roughly evenly split by gender (51.5% female). The majority (72%) were White, 10.3% were African American, 3.1% were Latino or Latina, 6.2% were Asian, and 5.3% were of mixed ethnic and racial background, as indicated by parents on the consent forms. Three parents (3%) did not report their child’s racial and ethnic background. All participants were fluent in English. They were recruited from schools, summer camps, and community programs in a moderately-sized Midwestern city and surrounding suburbs and villages. Participants came from 22 elementary schools and were to attend 22 middle schools. Only children whose parents gave written consent participated.

Design

Children were randomly assigned to watch a tween sitcom episode that was either low or high in social conflict. Within conflict level, they were assigned to see one of two exemplars (one from That’s So Raven; one from Unfabulous) for a total of four viewing conditions with gender balanced in each condition. Afterwards, they were interviewed about their reactions and asked about their habitual level of exposure to tween television programs depicting school.

This design allowed us to examine whether children’s views about middle school varied by level of conflict depicted in tween sitcoms (generalizing across two exemplars per level). In addition, we could examine whether their expectations about school varied by habitual exposure to tween programs. However, the design did not allow us to address questions about the effects of conflict level relative to a control group that did not watch anything, a constraint that was accepted in this initial investigation. Had we shown the children television programming that was completely unrelated to school, such material could have altered their responses about school (e.g., by boring them, cheering them up, or distracting them from ongoing rumination about school). Had we shown them nothing at all (a true control group), the questions about school would have come much earlier in the interaction, hence, participants may have been less comfortable disclosing their feelings or views. The strategy of comparing those who saw high-conflict episodes with those who watched episodes from the same series, focusing on different topics, is similar to that used by Coyne, Nelson, Robinson, and Gunderson (2011) in their study of adult responses to depictions of ostracism.

Procedure

Students participated individually outside of school hours. They watched the episode on a laptop computer and then the interviewer read aloud a series of open- and closed-ended questions. Students filled out their responses to
the closed-ended questions; open-ended responses were audio taped for later transcription and coding. The total time for the session ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. Afterward, the interviewer thanked the student, offered a $10 gift certificate to a bookstore or cinema and, in the high-conflict conditions, gave the following debriefing, “You know, my sense is that the schools here work really hard to make sure that kids get along. The program you watched really played up conflict because the people who make these sorts of programs think that conflict is interesting to watch. But really, the kids in middle school are just the same sort of kids you’ve known all along. All sorts of people can be friends and can make good choices and that’s not going to change just because you’re going to middle school. Okay?”

Materials

We chose two situation comedies in which the central protagonists are youths often shown interacting with others in school settings. That’s So Raven aired on the Disney Channel and continues to air on other Disney-affiliated networks including ABC. Unfabulous was in reruns on Nickelodeon at the time of the study. Both were popular with tween audiences (Levin, 2007; PR Newswire, 2006; Romano, 2008). From each program, one episode was selected that focused primarily on various expressions of conflict between social groups in school, and one was selected that showed little group conflict and that focused on other aspects of school besides peer relationships. The episodes were edited from 24 minutes to 15 minutes by removing subplots and shortening the opening and closing credits.

High conflict episodes

In the high-conflict That’s So Raven episode (“Run, Raven, Run”; Season 2, Episode 3), Raven and a longstanding social rival (both surrounded by their groups of friends) disagree over who should approach a new boy at school. After a series of comic mishaps, Raven and her best friend spend much of the episode running through school corridors trying to hide from the enemy’s supporters. Toward the end, it appears as though the conflict will be resolved but it flares up again and the episode finishes with the characters chasing each other once more. The episode contains both verbal and physical aggression (e.g., punching Raven’s friend in the arm).

In the high-conflict Unfabulous episode (“The Rep”; Season 1, Episode 7), students are assigned to spend a week interacting with members of a social crowd (e.g., jocks, populars, or audi-visual geeks) with which they do not normally associate. The main character (Addy) is assigned to a group of popular blonde girls and is tempted into avoiding her best friends who were put in less prestigious groups. Her friends are initially upset with her and then forgive her after she foils a plot to embarrass one of them. The episode contains both direct verbal aggression and indirect aggression.
LOW CONFLICT EPISODES

The low-conflict episodes were chosen not because they depict scenes of friendship and cooperation (which they do not), but because they focus on other aspects of school life. In the low-conflict That's So Raven episode ("Blue in the Face"; Season 2, Episode 9) Raven has trouble completing a science project and faces various slapstick consequences. In the low-conflict Unfabulous episode ("The Little Sister"; Season 1, Episode 11), Addy feels overshadowed by her older brother's scholastic and social reputation, but ultimately learns that her ability to write and play songs is a gift that he lacks and envies in her.

PILOT TEST AND MANIPULATION CHECK

Forty undergraduates who were unfamiliar with the hypotheses were randomly assigned to watch one of the four episodes used for this study. Afterward, they rated how rude, friendly, mean, and nice the students in the episode seemed on a 7-point scale from 0 not at all to 6 very. These four items were averaged to create a measure of character hostility (α = .89, positive items reversed). A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated the desired main effect of conflict level on ratings of character hostility: ratings were significantly higher in the high conflict (M = 5.09, SE = .10) than in the low-conflict condition (M = 2.34, SE = .10) F(1, 36) = 382.42, p < .001. Also as desired, the main effect of program was not significant (p > .20) nor was there a program by conflict level interaction (p > .8).

The manipulation check within the study itself involved asking participants to rate the characters using the same four-item scale as above (α = .83). As in the pilot test, a two-way ANOVA indicated that ratings of character hostility were significantly higher in the high conflict (M = 4.00, SE = .13) than in the low-conflict condition (M = 2.36, SE = .13) F(1, 91) = 79.85, p < .01. The main effect of program was not significant (p > .30) nor was there a significant program by conflict level interaction (p > .5). It was noteworthy that although tweens rated the high-conflict episodes above the mid-point on character hostility, they gave significantly lower ratings in this condition than did the undergraduate pre-test sample t(1, 63.65) = 7.23, p < .001 with adjustment for unequal variances.

Measures

The order of questions in the interviews was constant across viewing conditions. The interviewer asked about the participant’s age, the names of the participant’s current and future schools, familiarity with the new school, emotions about going to middle school, perceptions of middle school social climate, responses to a vignette involving social exclusion (not reported...
TABLE 1 Descriptive Statistics

<table>
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<th>SD</th>
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here), perceptions of the episode, and viewing of specific tween sitcoms. The measures are described below in conceptual clusters related to the order of the hypotheses. Descriptive statistics are given in Table 1.

PREVALENCE OF STEREOTYPED SOCIAL GROUPS

Participants were asked what groups they noticed at the school they attended for fifth grade and what groups they expected at their middle school. Two undergraduate coders, blind to the participants' viewing condition, coded the open-ended responses for mentions of jocks, populars, geeks and nerds, and emos and goths\(^3\) (\(\kappa = 1.0\) for each). Participants received a score of 0–4 for mentions of observing such groups in fifth grade and a score of 0–4 for mentions of expecting such groups at their future school.

EXPECTATIONS ABOUT PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Students rated 17 items, 10 of which were from the Negative Peer Interactions and Affiliation subscales of Way, Reddy, and Rhodes’ (2007) Perceived School Climate Scale. An additional seven items were generated based on pretest interviews with fifth graders about what they had heard about middle school and what types of interactions they had seen in television programs about school.

The interviewer read, “Here’s a list of things that might or might not happen in middle school and I want you to give your best guess about how common or normal these things are at [name of participant’s future middle school].” Response options ranged from 0 = not at all normal/never happens to 5 = very normal/happens a lot. Factor analysis (using principal components extraction and varimax rotation) suggested two interpretable
Effects of Tween Sitcoms

factors that explained 85% of the variance. Six items did not load above .5 on either factor or cross-loaded and were dropped. The first factor was an Anticipated Hostility factor of 7 items (Kids who are different get teased; Kids spread rumors to be mean; Popular kids are mean to unpopular kids; Kids get picked on for the type of clothes they wear; Kids make fun of each other; There are some students who don’t have any friends; There are some kids who don’t have anyone to hang out with at recess; \( \alpha = .86 \)). The second was an Anticipated Friendliness factor of 4 items (Kids in a class are friendly to each other; New kids are treated nicely by the other kids in class; Kids become friends in band or choir or other school groups; Kids in a class generally like each other; \( \alpha = .73 \)). These two measures were negatively correlated as might be expected, but only at \( r = -.35 \) so they were kept as separate variables. The reliabilities for the two measures were consistent with those reported by Way et al. (2007) which ranged from .72 to .77.

In addition, participants estimated how many students out of a class of 20 would be likely to be bullied in middle school, and how many students would be involved in the bullying. The latter estimate was consistently unrelated to predictors and is not discussed further.

EMOTIONS ABOUT MIDDLE SCHOOL

The interviewer asked, “Right now when you think about going to [name of middle school], how much do you feel . . . ?”. Students rated 10 adjectives, on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 0 = not at all to 6 = very strongly. Eight of these adjectives came from the PANAS-C (Crook, Beaver, & Bell, 1998) and two (glad, worried) were added, based on pretest open-ended questions. Principal components extraction and varimax rotation revealed two interpretable factors that explained 63% of the variance. The first, labeled Positive Feelings, consisted of five items (happy, excited, pleased, comfortable, glad; \( \alpha = .74 \)). The second, labeled Anxious Feelings, consisted of three items (scared, worried, nervous; \( \alpha = .75 \)). Two items (calm and stressed) were dropped because of cross-loadings.

INTERPRETATIONS OF HUMOR AND HOSTILITY

Four items related to perceived humor (Episode is funny, humorous, Students are funny, humorous) were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (0 = not at all to 6 = very). Cronbach’s alpha was .85. As previously described in the section on the manipulation check, participants also rated how rude, friendly, mean, and nice the students seemed on the same Likert-type scale.

KNOWLEDGE OF PEER RELATIONSHIPS AT FUTURE SCHOOL

Students were asked what (if anything) they had heard about their future school. Although individual participants could have mentioned hearing both
positive and negative things about peer relationships, this did not occur in our sample. As a result, responses were coded as (1) mentioned hearing about fighting or social conflict, (0) no mention of conflict or friendliness, (−1) mentioned hearing about friendliness of students (κ = .87). For clarity, this measure is subsequently referred to as: “Heard of hostility at future school.”

HABITUAL VIEWING OF TWEEN TELEVISION

Students indicated how frequently they watched each of the following programs: iCarly, Unfabulous, Drake and Josh, Hannah Montana, Suite Life of Zack and Cody, That’s So Raven, Zoey 101, Sonny with a Chance, True Jackson VP, and Wizards of Waverly Place. Response options were: never (0), once/twice (1), occasionally (2), every time or almost every time there’s a new episode (3). Scores for each program were summed to create a measure of overall exposure, ranging from 0 to 30. The programs were chosen because they were popular and because examination of episode descriptions on TV.com indicated that they depicted interactions in school.

RESULTS

Hierarchical regressions were used to test the first three sets of hypotheses, which proposed effects of habitual exposure to tween sitcoms (a continuous variable) and experimental condition (a dichotomous variable) on expectations and feelings about middle school. We controlled for participants’ reports that they had heard of hostility at their future school, because it was possible that those who had heard about conflict would find tween sitcoms more compelling and watch more. We also controlled for gender, given that tween sitcoms tend to feature female stars and that girls may be more focused on peer networks (e.g., Urberg, Degirmencioglu, Tolson, & Halliday-Secher, 1995). These two variables were entered on the first step, the dummy code for experimental conflict level and the centered term for habitual tween sitcom viewing were entered on the second step, and the interaction term was entered on the third step. Hypothesis 5 also involved continuous variables (perceived character hostility and perceived humor) and was also tested using hierarchical regression.

Power calculations, using Gpower software (Erdfelder, Faul, & Buchner, 1996), indicated that with 97 participants and \( p < .05 \), power to detect an effect of \( f^2 = .09 \) for the final step containing the interaction, after entering two-four variables on preceding steps, was .83. This falls within the guidelines for acceptable power to detect a moderate effect size (Cohen, 1988).
Hypotheses 1a–1c: Expectations of Groups in Middle School

The first set of hypotheses predicted that habitual exposure to tween sitcoms (Hypothesis 1a) and experimental exposure to high-conflict episodes rather than low-conflict episodes (Hypothesis 1b) would be associated with expectations of encountering more stereotypical groupings (i.e., jocks, populars, nerds or geeks, goths or emos) in middle school. In addition, we predicted that the effects of conflict condition on expectations would be stronger for light tween television viewers (Hypothesis 1c). In addition to controlling for gender and whether they had heard of hostility at their future middle school, we controlled for the number of these groups they said were present at their elementary school. As can be seen from Table 2, habitual exposure to tween television programs was positively related to expectations of stereotypical groups in middle school. Experimental condition was not a significant predictor, nor was there a significant interaction. Thus, Hypothesis 1a was supported but Hypothesis 1b and Hypothesis 1c were not.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between habitual tween television exposure and expectations of stereotypical social groupings in middle school. For comparison, it also shows reports of such groups in elementary school. As can be seen, participants reported very few of these groupings in elementary school, regardless of their level of tween television viewing, but those who watched more tween television anticipated more such groups in middle school.

![Figure 1](image)

**FIGURE 1** Current and expected social groupings by levels of tween television. Note. Covariate adjusted means are shown for low, medium and high viewing groups, which were created for illustrative purposes by splitting the sample at the 33rd and 66th percentile.
### TABLE 2  Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Expectations and Affect about Middle School

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Note. Standardized coefficients are presented from the step in which each variable was entered. $R^2$ change is reported for each of the three steps in each regression equation. Gender was coded 0 = male, 1 = female. In instances where the final model was not significant, the Adjusted $R^2$ Total and associated significance are also given for the preceding step.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Hypotheses 2a–2c: Anticipated Bullying, Hostility, and Friendliness in Middle School

The second set of hypotheses predicted that habitual exposure to tween sitcoms (Hypothesis 2a) and experimental exposure to high-conflict episodes (Hypothesis 2b) would be associated with more negative expectations about
levels of hostility, friendliness, and bullying in middle school. In addition, we proposed an interaction, such that the effects of experimental condition would be stronger for light tween television viewers for each of these outcomes (Hypothesis 2c).

As Table 2 shows, the results provided partial support for Hypothesis 2a–2c. With regard to Hypothesis 2a, anticipated bullying and friendliness, but not anticipated hostility, showed the hypothesized relationship with habitual viewing. Figure 2 illustrates the positive relationship between habitual viewing of tween television programs and participants’ estimates of the number of children who would be bullied out of a class of 20. With regard to Hypothesis 2b, anticipated hostility and friendliness, but not bullying, showed the hypothesized effect of experimental condition, such that those who watched high-conflict episodes expected more hostility and less friendliness. With regard to Hypothesis 2c, anticipated hostility and friendliness (but not bullying) showed the hypothesized interaction between habitual viewing and experimental conflict level.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the simple slopes analysis for anticipated hostility, treating habitual tween television viewing as the moderator of the effects of conflict condition, indicated significant effects of depicted conflict at low (−1 SD) and average levels of tween television viewing, \( t(1, 91) = 3.94, p < .001 \) and \( t(1, 91) = 3.01, p < .01 \), respectively, but no significant effect at high (+1 SD) levels of tween television viewing.

**FIGURE 2** Anticipated bullying in middle school by levels of tween television. *Note.* Covariate adjusted means are shown for low, medium and high viewing groups, which were created for illustrative purposes by splitting the sample at the 33rd and 66th percentile.
FIGURE 3 Effects of conflict condition by habitual viewing: anticipated hostility in middle school. Note. \(*p < .01, **p < .001.\)

As illustrated in Figure 4, the simple slopes analysis for anticipated friendliness indicated significant effects of depicted conflict on anticipated hostility at low (−1 SD) and average levels of tween television viewing, \(t(1, 91) = -3.72, p < .001\) and \(t(1, 91) = -2.82, p < .01\), respectively, but no significant difference at high (+1 SD) levels of tween television viewing.

Hypothesis 3a–3c: Effects on Feelings about Middle School
The third set of hypotheses predicted parallel effects of experimental condition and habitual exposure to tween sitcoms on participants’ feelings about attending their future middle school. As can be seen from Table 2, girls reported significantly more anxious feelings than boys. With regard to Hypothesis 3a, feelings of anxiety (but not positive feelings) were significantly predicted by habitual tween television viewing. As expected, those who watched more tween television habitually reported more anxious feelings. With regard to Hypothesis 3b, both anxious and positive feelings varied by experimental conflict level so that, as expected, those who saw the high-conflict episodes felt more anxious and less positive about going to middle
school. With regard to Hypothesis 3c, the hypothesized interaction between habitual viewing and experimental condition was not significant for either anxious or positive feelings. That is, the effects of experimental condition on feelings about middle school did not vary by habitual viewing.

Hypothesis 4: Perceived Character Hostility as a Mediator of Negative Effects

The fourth hypothesis predicted that the effect of experimental conflict level on predictions and feelings about middle school would be mediated by participants’ perceptions of the characters’ hostility in the episode viewed. Given the small sample size, we used bootstrapping to test the significance of the indirect effect, after controlling for gender and whether participants had heard of hostility in their future school (Preacher & Hayes, 2004; Preacher & Leonardelli, 2010). Bootstrap testing (with 1,000 resamples) indicated significant mediation for anticipated hostility in school (bootstrap estimate = .53, bias corrected and accelerated 95% CI = .16–1.0). There was also significant mediation for anticipated friendliness (bootstrap estimate = −.45; 95% CI = −.87 to −.20), and anxious feelings about school (bootstrap estimate = .77;
95% CI = .09–1.0). Mediation was not significant for positive feelings about school. Thus H4 was partially supported: for three of the four dependent variables, the effect of the episodes on participants’ beliefs and feelings about middle school was partly a function of the degree to which they perceived the characters to be hostile.

Hypothesis 5: Effects of Perceived Humor

The final hypothesis predicted that perceived humor would moderate the effects of perceived character hostility on expectations about middle school, such that the negative effects of perceived hostility should be stronger at high ratings of humor than at low ratings of humor.

To test this, we ran regressions for the four measures of expectations, entering the centered terms for perceived character hostility and perceived episode and character humor on the first step, and the interaction term on the second step. Contrary to Hypothesis 5, rating of humor was not a significant predictor for any of the outcomes, nor did it interact with perceived hostility. It is worth noting that there was no significant difference between the low- and high-conflict episodes in ratings of humor (M low conflict = 4.26, SD = 1.64; M high conflict = 3.62, SD = 1.61).

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to examine how television content targeted toward tweens may shape their beliefs and feelings about social relationships in school. Based on the General Aggression Model (Anderson & Bushman, 2005), we hypothesized that depictions of high school contribute to young viewers’ social scripts about peer relationships, their person schemata about typical social groupings, and their affective associations with middle school. We had fifth-grade students from a wide variety of schools watch one of four tween television episodes and then discuss their expectations about their future middle school and their habitual viewing of tween television content.

Given the nature of media depictions of high school peer relationships (Coyne & Archer, 2004; Kavaney, 2006; Lee, 2010; Northup & Liebler, 2010), we anticipated that habitual tween television viewers would be more likely to expect stereotyped social groupings and hostile, manipulative interactions. Indeed, the results indicated that participants’ habitual exposure was significantly associated with a number of judgments about their future school, even after controlling for gender and prior information about hostile peer relationships there. Heavier viewers, relative to lighter viewers, were more likely to mention expecting the presence of jocks, populars, nerds, and emos—groupings they did not describe encountering in elementary school.
They also anticipated less friendliness and more bullying and reported feeling more anxious about their future school.

As an illustration of these relationships, consider the following exchange from one of our interviews:

Student: There’s a show that I watch sometimes called *Ned’s Declassified School Survival Guide*. It is on Nickelodeon. I don’t know if this is true. There were some girls who were the popular girls at this school and they were like the fashion police. They had sirens and they would run up to people and write notes on why their clothes weren’t okay and why they couldn’t be popular because of their ugly clothes.

Interviewer: Do you think that’s realistic?

Student: It could be. I think sometimes like one of the popular people put other people down if they don’t wear nice clothes which I don’t think is very fair.

Interviewer: So you think when television shows portray that, it is realistic?

Student: It could be. I have heard a lot about middle school. I think people get more judgmental. I have heard a lot of that sort of happening. I guess as they get older. So I think that might be what happens.

Of course, neither the correlational data nor the example above are evidence of causal effects, let alone unidirectional causality. They suggest relationships that are explicable in reverse (anxious students watch tween television) or as a mutually reinforcing spiral (Slater, 2007). Perhaps those whose anxieties or expectations lead them to find tween television depictions most plausible or relevant are most likely to watch, which, in turn, shapes and strengthens their views. Nonetheless, the significant relationships between habitual exposure and most, though not all, of the dependent variables, were consistent with the causal predictions offered by the General Aggression Model.

In addition, we examined participants’ responses to four episodes depicting interactions in school. This experimental component of the study posed the question of whether children would respond differently to low-conflict and high-conflict episodes, and the answer was that they did. Those who saw high-conflict episodes anticipated more hostility and less friendliness in their future school, and reported feeling more anxious and less positive about going there than those who saw low-conflict episodes.

Three of these four effects were significantly mediated by the participants’ evaluations of the characters. That is, those who saw high-conflict episodes, relative to those who saw low-conflict episodes, rated the characters as meaner, ruder, and less friendly, and these evaluations predicted their views about middle school. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that fifth graders did not perceive the interactions in quite the same way as college under-
graduates—the same high-conflict episodes were judged as significantly less hostile by the target audience than by young adults. We were interested in hostility as it resided in the eye of the beholder and tween eyes saw the episodes slightly differently.

We also examined participants' perceptions of humor. The fifth graders in our sample rated the low- and high-conflict episodes as equally amusing—conflict did not appear to detract from ratings of how funny the content was, but neither did it enhance those ratings. Most importantly, participants' ratings of humor did not alter the effects of perceived hostility. Contrary to our hypothesis, there was no indication that finding the material funny made participants more susceptible to depictions of conflict.

This is not to say that humor does not matter. It was clearly of substantial importance to the students, who often gave extensive suggestions about how producers could make the material funnier. Ideally, further research would re-examine the potential moderating effects of humor with a larger sample size (hence, more power) and would also offer a more fine-grained analysis of responses to hostile humor. It seems particularly important, for example, to examine whether evaluations of humor vary depending on viewers' identification with the maker or the target of a hostile joke, and how patterns of identification may alter the emotional consequences of viewing.

There were also other important limitations of the current study to be addressed with further work. We did not assess whether the episodes differed in the degree to which they were arousing, hence, the degree to which the effects of high-conflict episodes on feelings of anxiety potentially reflect excitation transfer. Even more importantly, the current design did not assess how children's views about school, after seeing the low- or high-conflict episodes, would have differed from the expectations and feelings of children who did not see any episodes. That is, we do not know, as a result of this study, whether the high-conflict episode made the participants more pessimistic than they would otherwise be and/or whether the low-conflict episode made them more sanguine than they otherwise would be. Clearly, this needs resolution in further research.

Nonetheless, the results suggest that to the extent that children watch tween television programs featuring the antics of high school characters (which millions do; News Wire, 2010; PR Newswire, 2010), low-conflict depictions will be associated with more positive expectations of school than high-conflict depictions. Indeed, participants who did not regularly watch tween programs at home, and who saw one of the high-conflict episodes, resembled habitual viewers in their lowered expectations of friendly school climate and heightened expectations of hostility.

An obvious question is how long such effects endure once students actually start attending middle school. Do students soon realize that things are not nearly as bad as they had feared and settle down? Alternately, (as
would be suggested by the General Aggression Model) do their initial beliefs shape their subsequent interactions, helping to generate the reality they saw on television? Support for the latter possibility comes from the longitudinal findings of Gentile et al. (2011), that third- and fifth-grade children’s increases in aggression and decreases in prosocial behavior were predicted by their exposure to media violence and by their hostile attribution biases.

Taken together, Gentile et al.’s (2011) findings and the current results suggest the value of additional research that would follow children across the key moment of transition to middle school, assessing the implications of hostile, aggressive media content not only for social behaviors, but also students’ levels of commitment to school. Prior research suggests that student anxiety and perceptions of an unsupportive classroom environment predict poorer motivation and engagement in school (Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). It is worth investigating still further whether aspirational depictions of teen school life, in the pursuit of laughter and entertainment, have the ironic effect of making students more anxious, more hostile, and less committed to school than they would otherwise be.

NOTES

1. As originally conceived, indirect aggression involved rather covert acts of social manipulation, such as spreading rumors behind someone’s back (Lagerspetz, Bjorkvist, & Peltonen, 1988; Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992). The notion of relational aggression (Crick et al., 1999) also focused on intentional damage to the victim’s social status and relationships, whether through covert, indirect activities such as spreading rumors or by more overt behaviors such as publicly ignoring someone. Social aggression (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson & Gariep, 1989; Galen & Underwood, 1997) included an even broader array of behaviors, such as direct verbal attacks, indirect manipulation, or hostile nonverbal cues such as rolling one’s eyes. All three share the emphasis on inflicting harm to the victim’s social standing rather than causing physical pain.

2. Two unpublished content analyses also offer clues about the depictions of teen relationships. Gerding (2011) indicated that over 80% of 30 “teen scene” programs targeted at tween audiences featured physical violence, the majority of which was presented as humorous. Scheibe and Lowery (2009) reported an average of seven acts of verbal aggression per half-hour tween and teen program in which characters exchanged slurs (e.g., loser and jerk) and insults about their intelligence, appearance, or personality. Such slurs and insults tended to co-occur with other nonphysical forms of aggression such as social isolation and gossiping.

3. The choice of which groups to count was based on: a) examples of prototypical school crowds reported in prior research (e.g., B. B. Brown, 1990; Horn, 2003), b) social crowds in high school films and television programs (e.g., Kavaney, 2006; Northup & Lieber, 2010), c) what appeared in the transcripts. Some groups, such as cheerleaders or druggies and potheads, that we anticipated encountering in the transcripts were not mentioned by any children, so were not included as part of this measure.

REFERENCES


Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Denver, CO.


