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Riva Tukachinsky
Chapman University, tukachin@chapman.edu

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When Actors Don't Walk the Talk: Parasocial Relationships Moderate the Effect of Actor-Character Incongruence

RIVA TUKACHINSKY
Chapman University, USA

The study examines the effect of a narrative that featured an actor playing a counterattitudinal role. Participants read an online magazine interview with a popular comedian and then watched a sitcom in which this actor played a role that was either consistent or inconsistent with his personal views. Parasocial relationships with the actor moderated the effect of actor-character incongruence. Specifically, incongruence was associated with lower support for narrative-related attitudes, but only among viewers with weak parasocial relationships. These results provide evidence of the existence of vicarious cognitive dissonance, wherein witnessing another person's hypocritical behavior produces attitude change in the observer.

Keywords: parasocial relationships, media effects, cognitive dissonance

Entertainment media messages can have effects on media consumers' attitudes and behaviors as audience members become involved with the narrative, transport into the storyworld, and identify with the fictional characters (cf. Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013). However, although involvement with the message itself is undoubtedly important, other psychological mechanisms underlying effects of entertainment media should not be overlooked. One limitation of many experimental studies in this domain is that, with few exceptions (Moyer-Gusé, Jain, & Chung, 2012), these studies examine the impact of exposure to a single media message. Examining media effects in isolation from consideration of viewers' prior exposure to the actor limits our understanding of how media effects occur in naturalistic media environments, in which individuals are exposed to multiple, sometimes even conflicting, messages.

The present study aims to make a step toward bridging this gap by exploring the effect of combinations of incongruent messages. Specifically, the study examines the phenomenon of vicarious cognitive dissonance, wherein media consumers are exposed to an ostensibly hypocritical actor playing a role in a fictional narrative that promotes ideas that contradict the actor's own beliefs. Unlike typical education-entertainment and narrative persuasion studies, building on vicarious dissonance theory (Cooper, 2010), the current study focuses on the role of involvement with the actor (not the fictional character the actor plays) across different media exposure situations as a vehicle of persuasion.

Riva Tukachinsky: rivat@email.arizona.edu

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Actor-Character Incongruence

Media coverage of actors' personal affairs in entertainment television shows and magazines, as well as celebrity endorsements and commercials, enable the public to form an impression of the actors' personalities, values, preferences, and beliefs (Adams & Lubbers, 2000; Amos, Holmes, & Strutton, 2008; Bakker, 2001). Consequently, audience members may feel that they know the actors as friends and become emotionally invested in them (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). However, such media outlets also can reveal a dissonance between the actors' attitudes/beliefs and the roles that they play.

To illustrate the issue, consider the following example. Jennifer Aniston is a well-liked actor who stated in a *Rolling Stone* interview that she supports and personally enjoys (with her then husband, Brad Pitt) recreational marijuana use (Binelli, 2001). Shortly thereafter, Aniston starred in the movie *The Good Girl* (2002), in which Aniston's character expressed disapproval of her husband's cannabis habit, blamed the drugs for their crumbling marriage, and lamented that marijuana might have compromised his fertility. What, then, would be the effect of exposure to this fictional narrative on viewers? Abundant research in the realm of narrative persuasion (for meta-analysis, see Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013) indicates that Aniston's sympathetic character should promote support for narrative-consistent attitudes (in this case, disapproval of drugs). However, if viewers are aware of the discrepancy between the actor's attitudes and the role she portrays in the narrative, they might see the actor as hypocritical and less likely persuaded by the character she played.

It is important to stress that viewers may expect consistency between actors' and their characters' attitudes and behaviors. The distinctions between actors and characters are not strictly maintained, and media consumers misattribute characters' behaviors to actors' personalities. Although actors do not represent themselves when they play a role, viewers often project the attributes of the character to their perception of that actor (Tal-Or & Papirman, 2007). Thus, just as consumers expect spokesperson-product congruency (Kamins, 1990; Kamins & Gupta, 1994), media audiences might expect the behaviors of actors to be consistent with the actions of their fictional characters. This expectation is not entirely unreasonable, provided that many actors are in a position to turn down roles. Moreover, producers and screenwriters admit that it is a common practice to modify the script at the behest of an actor (e.g., "How Common Is It," 2011), which could eliminate the incongruence. For instance, it appears to be no coincidence that many vegetarian characters in fictional television series are played by actors who are, in real life, dedicated vegans and vegetarians (e.g., Korner, 2012). If vegan or vegetarian activists, such as actors Natalie Portman, Emily Deschanel, and Jorja Fox, were to play a role of an avid fur-wearing carnivore, their fan base would recognize the apparent dissonance between the actors' personal beliefs and their actions as characters.

According to the cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1962), engaging in a counterattitudinal behavior leads to psychological discomfort that individuals are motivated to reduce. To do so, people can employ various behavioral and cognitive strategies, including alteration of the dissonant cognitions (Harmon-Jones, 2002). Curiously, however, this effect can extend beyond the person exhibiting a hypocritical behavior. It has been demonstrated that, under certain conditions, counterattitudinal behavior can have similar implications for *observers* of the dissonant behavior (Cooper, 2010). The present study

examines whether the same mechanism can come into play in a mediated context, influencing media consumers who observe a seemingly hypocritical actor. Thereby, the study adds to the existing body of research demonstrating that psychological processes that occur in personal experiences may also take place when observing media figures engaged in those situations (e.g., vicarious learning, Bandura, 2004; vicarious operant conditioning, Schiappa, 2008).

From Personal to Vicarious Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance theory rests on the assumption that individuals strive to maintain consistency between their attitudes and behaviors (Festinger, 1962). Engaging in a counterattitudinal behavior arouses an unpleasant sensation of dissonance that people are motivated to eliminate through various strategies, such as selective exposure to media messages that add consonant cognitions that override the dissonance (Cotton, 1985) and discounting the importance of the domain of the dissonance (cf. Harmon-Jones, 2002). Another important dissonance reduction strategy involves changing attitudes or behaviors.

First, attitude change can occur when people engage in behaviors that contradict their private beliefs. Individuals might change their attitudes so that they become consistent with their overt behaviors. For example, engaging in a counterattitudinal behavior (e.g., telling another person that a dull task was interesting) leads to a change in attitude in a way that makes the behavior consistent with the private views (e.g., rating the dull task to be more interesting) (e.g., Calder, Ross, & Insko, 1973). Second, instead of changing their attitude, individuals can change their behaviors to be more in line with their expressed attitudes. Specifically, when people become aware of being a hypocrite, they will be more likely to change their behavior in a way consistent with their expressed attitude. Thus, delivering a speech advocating for condom use and then being reminded of not always practicing this behavior made students more willing to purchase condoms (Stone, Aronson, Crain, Winslow, & Fried, 1994; Stone & Fernandez, 2008). Taken together, then, cognitive dissonance theory suggests that individuals can change their attitudes or behaviors to restore consistency between their private beliefs and the behaviors they display.

This theory was originally concerned with personal dissonance, where behavior or attitude changes occur due to violation of the person's internal self-consistency. However, building on social identity theory, it was suggested that a dissonant behavior of one person can produce attitudinal change in another individual. According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981, 1982), group membership can have a substantial emotional value and be an important component of an individual's self-concept. The more strongly an individual identifies with a particular group, the more that person's self-concept is fused with that of the group as a whole. Through processes of self-categorization and depersonalization, the individual self-concept becomes part of a group prototype, where the individual's attitudes and norms become assimilated with those of other group members (Hogg, 2001). Given the need to enhance and maintain their personal self, people are motivated to evaluate their group favorably and emphasize positive group distinctiveness. Thus, if a dissonant behavior poses a threat to the individual's positive self-regard, witnessing an in-group member's cognitive dissonance can conceivably elicit discomfort in the observer (Cooper, 2010). To relieve the vicarious dissonance, observers of another person's dissonance can resort to the same strategies used to cope with a personal dissonance.

The effect of vicarious dissonance on attitude change in observers has been well documented in

the interpersonal context (for review, see Cooper, 2010). The experimental paradigm typically involves a research subject (usually a college student) witnessing either an in-group or an out-group confederate (a student from a rival university or the participant's institution) delivering a persuasive speech advocating for a certain issue (e.g., applying sunscreen). Later, the research subject overhears the confederate admitting to not practicing the course of action he or she has supported in the speech. Then, the study participant's behaviors and attitudes toward the issue are assessed. In line with social identity theory and cognitive dissonance theory, exposure to an in-group member experiencing cognitive dissonance produced significant effects on individuals who strongly associated themselves with their group (e.g., Fernandez, Stone, Cooper, Cassio, & HoggJan, 2007).

To summarize, studies in interpersonal contexts highlight the importance of group identification for a vicarious dissonance effect. Being psychologically close to another person who engaged in a hypocritical behavior resulted in a cognitive reduction persuasion effect in the observer. Exposure to media also may promote the types of vicarious dissonance responses addressed here. In the case of social identity theory, vicarious dissonance operates through a strong sense of group belongingness. Without doubt, social identity plays an important role in mass communication contexts, because viewers consider characters in terms of their group membership (e.g., Mastro, 2003). However, arguably, there are additional ways in which media consumers can relate to media personalities. The present study specifically focuses on one such possible variable—parasocial relationships (PSR)—as a possible antecedent of vicarious dissonance.

Parasocial Relationships as a Context of Vicarious Dissonance

PSR are defined as "seeming face-to-face relationships between spectator and performer" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). Over time, through repeated media encounters, viewers become attracted to media figures, develop a more nuanced understanding of the characters, and eventually cultivate a sense of intimacy and kinship with them (Klimmt et al., 2006). Some of these relationships resemble friendships, and others are akin to romantic crushes (Tukachinsky, 2010). When a show in which the target of PSR goes off the air, the parasocial break-up might elicit feelings of grief in the viewer that mimic the response to nonmediated relationship dissolution (Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

Building on theories of media effects, social learning, and persuasion, it has been hypothesized that PSR with media figures can facilitate persuasion in a number of ways. First, interest in and attraction to media figures were presumed to increase exposure and attention to messages featuring a liked media figure (Klimmt et al., 2006). Attention and repeated exposure, in turn, provide conditions that are likely to produce media effects. Second, liking and feeling close to media characters enacting prosocial behaviors were thought to enhance viewers' self-efficacy and therefore boost the effects of modeling (Bandura, 2004). Finally, PSR can suppress certain mechanisms of resistance to persuasion, including reactance and counterarguing with the message. Thus, PSR were hypothesized to increase message compliance (Moyer-Guse, 2008).

The effects of PSR can extend beyond viewers' attitudes toward issues specifically advocated for by the media figure and have consequences for individuals' self-concept. Media consumption can be used

to manage identity needs (Harwood, 1999). So PSR with favorite characters provide a sense of belongingness (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009) and facilitate development of one's social and personal identities (Hoffner, 2009). In this process, audience members psychologically merge their self-concept with that of media figures and assimilate attributes of the media personae with their own self-concept (Derrick, Gabriel, & Tippin, 2008; Young, Gabriel, & Sechrist, 2012). With strong PSR, fandom may constitute an important component of the individual's personal and group identity (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). The deep psychological bond between media consumers and the targets of PSR can be inferred from the fact that exposure to a liked celebrity can enhance the viewers' self-esteem (Derrick et al., 2008), but the media figure's failure elicits sorrow (as indicated by the parasocial interaction measure [PSI]¹, Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985).

Taken together, PSR constitute a profound form of involvement with actors that can impact individuals' self-perception in ways that parallel social relationships in a nonmedia context. This sense of allegiance can arouse vicarious dissonance when a liked actor engages in a hypocritical behavior. In the absence of PSR, audience members may become critical of an actor who performs a counterattitudinal role. However, individuals who engage in meaningful PSR with the actor are likely to experience dissonance. For example, PSR with a media figure may have implications for consumers' responses to a celebrity's misconduct. PSR engender forgiveness of the celebrity's questionable behaviors and mitigate the potentially damaging effect of celebrity scandals on attitudes toward products endorsed by these media figures (Lee, 2015; Um, 2013). Thus, viewers with a strong parasocial bond with an actor who engages in a counterattitudinal behavior are more likely to respond to this situation by employing dissonance reduction strategies used to resolve personal dissonance and vicarious dissonance in interpersonal contexts.

Vicarious Dissonance in Mediated Context

Conditions for Attitude Change

Attitude change is only one strategy for dissonance reduction. A number of moderating variables determine whether measures other than attitude change can be used to resolve the dissonance. First, individuals may resolve the dissonance by deflecting responsibility for the dissonant behavior. Cognitive dissonance is most likely to produce attitude change when individuals have free choice to act in the dissonant manner and cannot blame others for their attitude-behavior incongruence (e.g., Zanna & Cooper, 1974). Second, individuals may trivialize the dissonance by dismissing the counterattitudinal behavior as inconsequential. Attitude change is typical to situations in which individuals believe that the dissonant behavior had aversive outcomes. For example, individuals are less likely to change their attitudes on an issue if they were led to believe that their counterattitudinal speech did not affect the target audience (e.g.,

¹ Parasocial interaction (PSI) involves a viewer's sense of having an actual interaction with the media figure while consuming the media content. Conversely, the term parasocial relationship (PSR) refer to the media consumer's emotional bond with the media figure that can exist outside of any particular media exposure situation (for discussion of these concepts see Klimmt et al., 2006). Importantly, Rubin's parasocial interaction scale (Rubin et al., 1985) includes several items that capture relational aspects of the parasocial experience.

Cooper & Worcbel, 1970).

Choice and Consequences in the Media Context

Both conditions are likely to be met in a mediated context. As discussed earlier, audience members may expect A-list actors to decline counterattitudinal roles or have the power to alter the script to eliminate incongruence. Thus, actors are likely to be held responsible for playing counterattitudinal roles. Furthermore, the belief that entertainment media can have profound negative effects on the public is highly prevalent among media consumers (Duck & Mullin, 1995). Therefore, viewers may consider the actor's counterattitudinal appearance to be consequential. Together, these conditions facilitate vicarious dissonance among viewers with strong PSR.

It is important to emphasize again that the dissonant behavior is not that of the fictional character but of the actor who is expressing one set of beliefs but then advocates for the contrary in a narrative (for as long as the viewer assumes that the actor had a choice to engage in this counterattitudinal behavior). When audience members feel that they personally know their favorite actor, they expect the actor to perform roles that are consistent with his or her views. When the actor chooses a counterattitudinal role, it is the actor (not the character) that is presumably hypocritical. Therefore, it is the involvement with the actor (through PSR), not the involvement with the fictional character (e.g., through identification), that is considered a critical moderator of the incongruence effect.

Research Hypotheses

The present study examines the effect of actor-character incongruence on narrative-related attitudes. Given the similarities between parasocial and social relationships, it was theorized that engagement with media figures will facilitate learning, persuasion, and compliance (Bandura, 2004; Klimmt et al., 2006; Moyer-Guse, 2008). It is therefore hypothesized that:

H1: Viewers who engage in strong parasocial relationships with an actor will report greater narrative-consistent attitudes compared to viewers with weak parasocial relationships.

It is asserted that audience members expect major actors to play roles that will be generally consistent with their core personal values. Therefore, the audience might regard actors who star in media content that promotes views opposite to their own as hypocritical. Following the logic of the match-up hypothesis in persuasion (Kamins, 1990; Kamins & Gupta, 1994), incongruence between an actor's attitudes and the attitude he or she advocates in a media message is expected to hinder the message persuasiveness. However, this effect should only be expected for viewers with weak PSR with the hypocritical actor. Building on the vicarious dissonance theory, when viewers have strong PSR with the actor, the hypocritical actor will still be persuasive. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H2: Viewers' parasocial relationships will interact with an actor's hypocrisy in predicting narrative-related attitudes. Specifically, exposure to a hypocritical actor (vs. an actor who plays an attitude-consistent role) will reduce support for narrative-consistent attitudes only among viewers who have

weak PSR with the actor. Viewers with strong PSR will report high message-consistent attitudes regardless of actor-character congruence.

Method

Study Overview

Participants were randomly assigned to actor-character congruent or incongruent conditions. To this end, participants' prior knowledge of the actor was manipulated. Before watching the fictional narrative, participants read an online magazine interview in which the actor expressed strong beliefs that were either consistent or inconsistent with those of the character. Upon reading the online interview and watching the television clip, participants completed a questionnaire that included measures of the dependent variables. An attempt to elicit varying levels of transportation using different instructions was unsuccessful. Consequently, these variables are not included in this article.²

Pilot Study

Given that extremely positive or negative attitudes are highly resistant to change, this study examines media effects in a context in which media consumers hold moderate views. A pilot study, conducted on a sample of 23 undergraduate students (15 women and 8 men), was used to identify such attitude objects. The pilot study revealed that attitudes toward cosmetic surgery are best suited for the current study. Support for women obtaining breast implants and attitudes toward oneself having a cosmetic surgery distribute normally (skew and kurtosis below .50) and fall around the midpoint of the scale ($M_{\text{women implants}} = 4.03$, $SD = 0.95$; $M_{\text{cosmetic surgery oneself}} = 3.54$, $SD = 1.53$ on a 7-point scale).

Participants

Study participants were recruited from undergraduate classes in communication and psychology and were offered course extra credit or \$15 in cash. Only data from participants who were certain that they had not seen the specific episodes used in the current study were included in the analysis. The data analysis is based on a final sample of 166 participants. Their age ranged between 18 and 23 ($M = 20.16$ years, $SD = 1.11$). Most of the participants were women ($n = 118$, 75.3%). Most of the students identified themselves as White ($n = 125$, 75.3%), and the rest were Hispanic ($n = 12$, 7.2%), Black ($n = 9$, 7.2%), Asian ($n = 6$, 3.6%), Native American ($n = 1$, .6%), or mixed race/other ($n = 15$, 7.8%).

Media Stimulus

Participants watched a 12-minute video clip that combined scenes from two 25-minute episodes

² Analysis of variance comparing participants in the different instructions conditions revealed no measurable differences in transportation ($p = .57$, $\eta^2 = .006$) or counterarguing ($p = .21$, $\eta^2 = .016$).

from *Everybody Loves Raymond* (CBS; 1999, Season 4, episodes 1 and 3). The edited clip depicted breast enhancement as a desirable and socially rewarded practice, suggesting that women who undergo this cosmetic surgery are more romantically and sexually attractive to men. The stimulus clip begins with Raymond, the main character, lying in bed watching sports on television. His wife, Debra, begins to kiss him, but Raymond ignores her advances and seems to be completely immersed in the game. In the next scene, Raymond and Debra attend a PTA meeting, where Raymond expresses strong sexual interest in a woman who obtained breast implants. Upon arriving back home, Raymond divulges to Debra his positive views of breast augmentation surgery. For example, he refers to meeting a woman with breast implants as "the best night of [his] life." In the concluding scene, Raymond returns home after traveling for work and discovers that Debra obtained breast implants. Raymond is excited (stating that she has made "two excellent choices") and shows considerable sexual interest in her. The clip ends with Debra removing the socks she placed in her bra, revealing that she did not actually obtain breast implants. Importantly, the edited stimulus did not include the scenes from the original show that deal with the revealing of the prank to avoid adding ambivalence to the issue. Throughout the edited clip, Raymond's character is unequivocally enthusiastic about breast implants.

Actor Hypocrisy Manipulation

All the participants watched the same fictional narrative in which the actor expressed support for cosmetic surgery. However, before watching the show, they read one of two different versions of an online entertainment magazine interview with the actor Raymond Romano, who plays Raymond's character on the show. All the interview questions were identical in both conditions, except the last question, which contained the actor/character dissonance manipulation. The interviewer brings up the question of women having breast implants. Romano responds with a strong statement that either favors breast augmentation surgery (the consonance condition) or objects to this practice (the dissonance condition). In the consonance condition, Romano describes breast implants as "an opportunity to maximize her [any woman's] potential" and states that "I think it's great that today, any woman can become anything she wants." He refers to getting breast implants as normative, common, and "a great way for women to boost their self-esteem and to improve the romance in their lives." These statements are consistent with the role of the pro-augmentation character Romano later plays.

In the dissonance condition, Romano states that "natural is beautiful." He maintains that women should be happy with their bodies and deserve a partner who can appreciate their true beauty. He refers to breast augmentation as "a painful and risky procedure" and criticizes the double standards in society, since women engage in these behaviors for a man who "is probably not a Calvin Klein model himself." By making these statements, this version of the article presents Romano in a way that is inconsistent with the character that encourages his wife to undergo a breast augmentation procedure.

A manipulation check item asked participants to what extent they thought that the actor's behavior on the show was consistent with his personal views (on a scale ranging from 1 = *very inconsistent* to 7 = *very consistent*). The manipulation produced a strong effect ($M_{\text{consonant}} = 2.23$, $SD = 1.61$, $M_{\text{dissonant}} = 4.71$, $SD = 1.99$, $t(192) = 9.43$, $d = 1.37$, $\eta^2 = .32$). To ensure that the perceived argument strength in the two conditions is equivalent, participants were asked to rate the extent to which the actor in the interview

supported or opposed breast cosmetic surgery (1 = *strongly opposed*, 7 = *strongly supported*). Participants rated the arguments equally strongly pro-surgery ($M = 5.94$, $SD = 1.89$) or against surgery ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.19$) relative to the middle point of the scale. Furthermore, participants were asked to rate how humorous the article was to ensure that aspects related to heuristic persuasion remained equivalent in both conditions. There were no distinguishable differences between the two versions of the article ($p = .35$).

Finally, free choice is a critical component of a cognitively dissonant situation. It is theoretically possible for media consumers to deflect cognitive dissonance by attributing an actor's dissonant behavior to lack of choice, asserting that he was obliged to perform a counterattitudinal role as part of his job. The current study does not measure the media consumers' expectation that actors only play attitude-consistent roles. Rather, to make dissonance rationalization less likely, the manipulation article stressed the many contributions that Romano made to the script in various domains. The article stressed several factual examples of ways in which Raymond's character on *Everybody Loves Raymond* is written to be commensurate with Raymond Romano's real life.

Parasocial Relationships

Viewers' prior PSR with the actor Raymond Romano were assessed using four items from Rubin et al.'s (1985) parasocial interaction scale: "I would like to meet him in person," "He makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend," "I would watch him on another TV program/movie," and "He seems to understand the kind of things I want to know." The items were chosen because they encompass relational aspects of parasocial experiences that extend beyond viewers' responses to the actor within a particular media encounter (similar to the notion of feeling affiliated with the other, or being part of the other's social circle, in vicarious cognitive dissonance research in an interpersonal context). $M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.35$ on a 7-point scale, Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$.

In line with recent research on PSR and mental merging with media figures (Young et al. 2012; Young, Gabriel, & Hollar, 2013), the sample was divided into two groups: individuals with strong PSR ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 0.64$) and those who were indifferent toward the media characters ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.91$) ($t(192) = 19.38$, $p < .001$).

Dependent Variables

Attitudes toward women obtaining breast implants. Support for women having breast implants was measured using a seven items that included statements such as: "I think that many women could benefit from getting breast implants." Agreement with all the statements was measured on a 7-point scale, with higher scores indicating more favorable attitudes toward women having breast implants (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$, $M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.15$).

Attitudes toward having a cosmetic surgery. Viewers' attitudes toward having plastic surgery themselves were measured as agreement with six items on a 7-point scale, with higher scores indicating more positive views of cosmetic surgery. The scale included statements such as "If money wasn't an issue, I would consider having cosmetic surgery" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$, $M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.49$). Confirmatory factor

analysis ensured that the items loaded appropriately on their corresponding latent factor ($\chi^2(64) = 228.28$, $p < .001$, normed fit index = .92, comparative fit index = .90, root mean square error of approximation = .09, (.08-.10). There was a strong correlation ($r = .58$, $p < .001$) between the two latent variables.

Control Variables

At the end of the post-exposure questionnaire, participants were asked to report their sex, ethnicity, and age. Additionally, participants were asked to think about their personal experience with cosmetic surgeries (e.g., breast augmentation, Botox injections) and indicate whether it was mostly positive or negative. Most of the participants (62.4%, $n = 121$) reported having no personal experience with cosmetic surgery. About one-third of the sample (31.4%, $n = 61$) reported a generally positive experience (rated 4 or above on a 7-point scale), and the remaining 6.2% ($n = 12$) had a relatively negative experience (rated 1-3 on a 7-point scale).

Results

It was hypothesized that PSR with the actor (H1) will increase narrative-consistent attitudes. Actor-character incongruence was expected to interact with PSR, such that incongruent representations will reduce narrative-consistent attitudes among viewers with weak PSR but not for viewers with strong PSR (H2). These hypotheses were tested using two hierarchical regression models predicting attitudes toward having a cosmetic surgery oneself and attitudes toward women obtaining breast implants. The first step included control variables (sex, age, race, and having positive experience with cosmetic surgery), the experimental condition (dissonant or consonant actor/character), and PSR with the actor. The second step entered the interaction between PSR and actor-character congruence into the model.

A regression predicting interest in having a cosmetic surgery ($F(6, 159) = 6.29$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .19$) revealed no significant main effects of PSR ($\beta = .01$, $p = .92$) or actor-character incongruence ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .95$). To test H2, the interaction between PSR and congruence was added to the model ($F(7, 158) = 6.54$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .23$, $F \Delta R^2(1, 158) = 6.66$, $p < .01$). The interaction was significant ($\beta = -.33$, $p < .01$). Decomposition of the interaction showed that character incongruence has a significant negative effect on attitudes for viewers who do not engage in meaningful PSR with the actor ($\beta = -.22$, $p < .05$). However, incongruence did not detract from narrative-consistent beliefs of those who had strong PSR with the actor ($\beta = .15$, $p = .16$). In other words, actor-character incongruence reduced narrative-consistent attitudes, but only among viewers who had *weak* PSR with the actor. To summarize, there was no evidence to support H1 (a direct effect of PSR); however, H2 (an interaction between PSR and incongruence) was supported.

For approval of women having breast implants, control variables, PSR, and incongruence condition were entered in the first step ($F(6, 159) = 4.75$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .12$). Here, again, there were no significant main effects of PSR ($\beta = .03$, $p = .74$) and actor-character incongruence ($\beta = -.11$, $p = .13$). To test H2, an interaction between PSR and congruence was added in the second step of the model ($F(7, 158) = 4.85$, $p < .05$, adjusted $R^2 = .18$, $F \Delta R^2(1, 158) = 4.75$, $p < .05$). In line with H2, the interaction was significant ($\beta = -.28$, $p < .05$). Effects decomposition showed that, for individuals who have weak PSR with the actor, incongruence had a negative effect on narrative-consistent attitudes ($\beta = -.29$, $p < .01$), but

incongruence did not have an effect on individuals with strong PSR ($\beta = .15, p = .16$). These results provide evidence in support of H2, suggesting that the effect of incongruence occurs only among media consumers who do not have strong PSR with the actor.

Figure 1. Effects of PSR with a consonant or dissonant actor on attitudes toward having a cosmetic surgery oneself.

In sum, a consistent pattern emerged for both outcome variables. Contrary to the prediction in H1, PSR with the actor were not related to narrative-consistent attitudes. However, in line with H2, actor-character incongruence was associated with lower narrative-consistent attitudes when viewers do not have PSR with the actor. For viewers with strong PSR, actor-character incongruence did diminish attitudes.

Discussion

This study explores the effect of a character whose behavior is incongruent with the attitudes of the actor playing this role. No direct effect of PSR on attitudes was found, but PSR are important in facilitating a vicarious dissonance effect. Actor-character incongruence is related to *lower* narrative-consistent attitudes when viewers *do not* have meaningful PSR with the actor. These findings are among the first to demonstrate the applicability of the notion of vicarious dissonance in a mediated context and offer a novel mechanism of entertainment-based persuasion. The results imply that when viewers' expectations for an actor to perform an attitude-consistent role are violated, viewers become more critical of the message. However, the data indicate that feeling friendly with the actor and having a strong sense of affiliation with the actor prior to observing the hypocritical behavior eliminate the negative effect of incongruence. This is likely an attempt to reduce the vicarious dissonance aroused by observing a hypocritical actor with whom the viewer feels affiliated. These findings have several important implications for persuasion and media effects as well as media involvement scholarship.

Figure 2. Effects of PSR with a consonant or dissonant actor on attitudes toward women obtaining breast implants.

First, these results draw interesting parallels between narrative and explicitly persuasive messages such as public service announcements and commercials. As expected, among viewers with weak PSR, actor-character incongruence diminished narrative persuasion. These results are consistent with the notion that,

for a persuasive message to be effective, it is critical that the values people attribute to a spokesperson are congruent with those that the spokesperson endorses in the persuasive message (e.g., Kamins, 1990). Thus, although narrative persuasion was theorized to be fundamentally different from the effects of explicit persuasive messages (Green & Brock, 2002; Slater & Rouner, 2002), the current study suggests that at least some lessons from explicit persuasion can apply to narrative persuasion.

Second, research in the domain of media involvement has uncovered similarities in the antecedents of social and parasocial experiences (e.g., Eyal & Dailey, 2012; Tukachinsky, 2010) and their consequences (e.g., Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003; Eyal & Cohen, 2006). The current study documents yet another way in which PSR are analogous to social ties, suggesting that media consumers can experience vicarious cognitive dissonance. Importantly, it seems that PSR do not change viewers' perceptions of the dissonance itself. Intensity of PSR was not correlated with perceptions of the extent to which the actor's attitudes were inconsistent with his role ($r = .09$, $p = .36$ in the incongruence condition). This suggests that PSR did not lead to dismissal of the incongruence. Rather, viewers noticed the dissonance, but only those who were meaningfully engaged with the actor were motivated to reduce this dissonance through attitude change.

Third, narrative persuasion research typically entails surveys examining the correlation between overall exposure to a particular message and attitudes (e.g., Brown, et al., 2003; Tian & Hoffner, 2010) or experimental examination of the effect of a single message (e.g., Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2010; Young et al., 2013). Such experimental studies have limited ecological validity, because they fail to mimic the real-world media environment in which consumers are exposed to a plethora of (often conflicting) messages. Only recently have researchers attempted to examine the possible interactive and additive effects of narratives and explicit persuasive messages (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2012). However, little is still known about the interactive effects of inconsistent messages. The present study adds to this emerging body of literature by demonstrating that incongruent information across different media messages (an online interview with the actor and a television sitcom) can have a unique effect on post-viewing attitudes.

Finally, this study did not find a main effect of PSR and narrative-related attitudes. These results resonate with a recent meta-analysis that estimated that the mean correlation between PSR and narrative-consistent attitudes is merely $r = .07$ (Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013). The results of the present study, therefore, add to a growing body of literature questioning the theorization of the relationship between PSR and persuasion. Conceivably, certain moderating factors inhibit or facilitate the effect of PSR on audience members. In other words, rather than directly leading to persuasion, PSR can work in orchestration with other variables to produce media effects. The current study demonstrates one such effect in the context of actor-character incongruence.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

This study points at the potential for exploration of vicarious dissonance in a mediated context. Further examination of the mechanisms underlying this effect and its boundary conditions is due. First, it

will be valuable to directly assess dissonance arousal and counterarguing and examine the extent to which these variables mediate the effect of PSR and incongruence interaction. Second, various moderators should be explored. One of the present study's limitations is that it employs a single media stimulus. Although it has been well established that humorous entertainment messages can impact viewers' attitudes (e.g., Ortiz & Harwood, 2007; Schiappa, Gregg & Hewes, 2005), it is conceivable that viewers are more likely to dismiss a sitcom than a drama. A dramatic media stimulus could, perhaps, produce an even stronger vicarious dissonance effect than that reported here.

Additional moderators known to affect vicarious dissonance in interpersonal contexts (particularly, choice and consequences) can be examined in a media context as well. Although the present study rests on the assumption that media consumers expect actor-character consistency, this assertion was not measured. Endorsement of this belief should moderate the effect of the dissonance. Furthermore, this question can be examined experimentally. This study used a stimulus that indicated that the actor could easily modify the script. Because cognitive dissonance depends on free choice, it can be hypothesized that the effects are eliminated if the interview article states that the actor was desperate to play any role whatsoever (versus explicitly stating that she or he is in a position to decline and rewrite roles). Finally, dissonance is also unlikely to occur if viewers anticipate the narrative to have no aversive consequences (e.g., the narrative promotes prosocial effects or the viewers do not subscribe to the "powerful media" paradigm).

As with most lab-based studies, questions of generalizability arise. In the current study, participants were exposed to the narrative immediately upon reading the interview with the actor. Outside the lab setting, although viewers may possess prior knowledge about the actor-character incongruence, the incongruence may not be as salient to them as it was in the experiment. It will be important, therefore, to examine the occurrence of vicarious dissonance without priming the incongruence immediately prior to the narrative exposure. It is possible that, in the public's mind, some actors are so strongly associated with certain values or behaviors (e.g., Angelina Jolie and humanitarian work or Lindsay Lohan's alcohol abuse) that incongruent roles in these domains will become apparent without a specific pre-exposure prime. Together, examining the ways actors and their fictional characters interact in producing media effects appears to be a promising direction for investigation. The results of the current study offer new questions that can have implications for media effects research.

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