

'Men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the holy cross': Gender differences in shared-religion bias in identifying with fictional characters

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This experimental research investigated if men and/or women have an own-religion bias in their strength of identification with fictional characters. Past research on this topic in psychology, literary studies, and game studies is limited and the expectations from identity theory are unclear. A hypertext fiction story game was used as an experimental stimulus, slightly modified for different participant groups. Almost 400 participants took part and ANOVA analysis carried out. The novel surprising results found no strong evidence of own-religion bias in identification for either gender but did produce good evidence of gender bias in identification. This reveals new complexities in identification research and suggests models from social identity theory may not generalise to identification, with practical application for informing literary creation.

Keywords: Arthurian; gender; fiction; hypertext; identification

Identification is the process by which a person recognises similarities between themselves and something else, such as another person, a group, or a fictional character. Identification has been discussed across the humanities, but as Cohen (2001) notes these ideas lack conceptualisation or testing. In the social sciences identification was discussed by Holt (1950) and Freud (2010, originally published 1923), but neither addressed identification with fictional characters.

Identification is an interesting and worthwhile topic in that a deeper understanding can inform artistic creation. A further real-world implication is an understanding of how to shape identification may help reduce prejudice as discussed by McLaughlin et al. (2018). Beyond these applications, a better understanding of identification may generalise to provide insight into identity, a topic that is difficult for practical reasons to research experimentally. Burke and Stets (2009) explained that identity can either be a role in society (as defined by Stryker, 1980), a group membership as understood by social identity theory or a set of personal characteristics; identities based on characteristics are a particularly under-researched topic.

Social identity theory (SIT) was originally developed by Tajfel (1970), who used an experimental design based around participants assigning points to other people. Tajfel found evidence of in-group bias, even with temporary group membership arbitrarily assigned by the experimenter. Rudman and Goodwin (2004) also looked at gender differences and found across multiple SIT experiments that women generally have a stronger in-group bias than men.

Klimmt (2009) studied games and claimed that identification occurs when the player sees attributes of their character as part of themselves. This position was supported empirically by Blake (2012), who found that identifying with video game characters increases enjoyment and transforms self-perception for at least a short time after play. There are also several studies on identification with game avatars including Martin (2005) and Bessi ere (2007). However, an avatar is merely a virtual object – a digital playing piece – and not a literary character. Survey research by Yee (2017) found that three-quarters of female gamers considered inclusion of female protagonists as ‘very or extremely important’, compared to only a quarter of male gamers, which could be considered an indication of in-group gender bias in identification.

Previous research by Hook (2019) into identification with fictional characters presented a new experimental method to study identification with fictional characters by using a hypertext fiction (HF) story game (Montfort, 2005), also called ‘choose-your-own -adventure’, as a stimulus which could be modified slightly for different groups. The reader reads each page and chooses a hyperlink to decide what the protagonist does. Examples of this medium include the computer game *Depression Quest* (Quinn, 2013) and the *Fighting Fantasy* book series, such as *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (Jackson & Livingstone, 1982). Aarseth (1997) provided an in-depth academic discussion of HF and made the case that the reader is an active player compared with the observer status of a reader of traditional fiction. Green and Jenkins (2014) discussed how the user control in HF increases enjoyment and engagement, of which they consider identification to be a facet. Hook (2019) discovered a gender difference in levels of identification: women displayed an own-gender bias in that they identified more strongly with female characters than male characters, but men did not display this bias and identified equally with characters regardless of gender.

This finding posed a question of whether this gender difference in in-group identification bias is specific to gender identity or whether it also applies to other identities. To put it another way, do men and/or women identify more strongly with characters that share a particular characteristic other than gender with themselves? The current paper attempts to answer this question using religion as the second identity.

While there has been some research into religious identity as a group identity from a SIT perspective; it should be noted this has not been strictly about identification. Cairns et al. (2010) found in-group bias researching Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, with particularly strong bias found among Protestants and those who strongly identify with their faith. Johnson et al. (2012) found evidence of Christians having negative attitudes to various out-groups (atheists, Muslims, and gay men) but it was not clear whether they acted in a biased way because of this. On the other hand, Hunter (2010) found no

evidence that Christians experience a self-esteem boost from the positive or negative evaluations of Christians or Atheists.

Ben-Ner et al. (2009) used a conventional SIT experimental design and reported in-group bias for most identity categories they investigated, with family/kinship being the strongest, followed by political, religious, sports-team and music-preference based groups. Strangely, they reported no significant findings based on gender. Ysseldyk (2010) discussed how religious identity is both a group membership and also a worldview belief system and differs from other social groups in offering a membership regarded as eternal.

Some particularly fascinating experiments into religious bias were reported by Różycka-Tran (2017). Using staged real situations such as trying to get a seat on a train while wearing religious dress, they found signs of helping behaviours being directed more towards those presenting as having a shared religion. This was consistent with Ahmed (2007) who argued that bias comes not from hostility to outsiders but favouritism towards in-group members.

Religion and gender are considered as group identities, especially by those researching group identity using SIT. However, they can both also be considered as personal characteristic based identities; someone physically stranded apart from all other people and so cut off from their group will likely still identify by their religion and gender. Indeed, people may turn to religion in times of such distress. Hence, religious identity is not simply a group membership-based identity but also a personal characteristic identity. The present study therefore directly addresses the shortfall in studies on personal characteristic identities (Burke & Stets, 2009) by investigating participants' identification with religious and non-religious fictional characters.

Based on the conclusions of SIT research such as Ben-Nur et al. (2009) it was expected that participants would identify more strongly with characters who shared their religion. An interaction with gender was also expected, with women showing a stronger in-group religious bias than men (Rudman & Goodwin, 2004).

METHODS

Participants

Participants were recruited by posting adverts on social media in gaming, roleplaying, Arthurian and religious groups. It ran online for two weeks in April 2019, and a total of 393 responses were recorded.

Most (75%) of the participants identified as male, followed by 21% who identified as female and the remaining 4% who either identified as non-binary or preferred not to say. In terms of religious identity, 62% were of no religion and 26% were Christian, with the remaining 12% selecting other religions. Most of the participants were native English speakers (85%), aged 25–50 (71%); from Europe (59%) or North America (33%). Typically they held at least one degree (73%), had a lot of prior exposure to Arthurian fiction (68%), had played more than ten interactive fiction games (53%), had more than a year of experience of tabletop role-playing games (52%), but very little or no experience with live-action role-playing (81%).

Materials

The stimulus used for this experiment was a custom written HF story game; the researcher's qualifications include creative writing. The story game details an Arthurian knight on a quest, broadly in the literary tradition of *Le Morte d'Arthur* (by Sir Thomas Malory, first published 1485, from which the quote in the title of this article derives) and the tabletop role-playing game *Pendragon* (Stafford, 1985). The participants had seven binary choices to make during the story about the decisions of the protagonist. Use of a setting far removed from everyday life avoided chancing upon the character having

other identities shared by the player, since it was relatively unlikely that a participant would identify as a knight.

Design

This experimental design was inspired by the method described in Hook (2019) and coded using the Twine software tool for creating HF. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups by the software. The only difference in the stimulus between the two groups was the character briefing screen at the start of the story. In one group, the protagonist was described as 'a pious and faithful Christian knight' and in the other as 'a knight with little interest in religion.' Christianity was chosen here due to the expectation that this would be the most represented religious identity among the participants.

The dependent variable of identification with the character involved two seven-point Likert-type items: 'How strongly did you identify with [character name]?' and 'How strongly were you able to take on the role of [character name]?'. The responses were averaged to lessen any influence of precise question wording.

Procedure

The story game was presented as a series of webpages, which enabled the experiment to be run online. This enabled a wide and diverse set of participants from across multiple countries and increased ecological validity in that participants used their own devices in their everyday settings.

Data was collected at the end of the story using a form and participants gave consent by completing the form and clicking submit. Participants were welcome to simply play through the story game and not take part by not completing or not submitting the form though it is unknown how many may have done this. An email address was given in case participants wished to withdraw later and no one made contact for this purpose.

On the form participants were asked two identification questions (as detailed above) and what religion they were, using the same categories as the Office for National Statistics, which are: no religion, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, other religion. Participants were also asked for their gender, with the options: male, female, 'other / non-binary' and 'prefer not to say', to be consistent with Hook (2019).

Additional questions covering topics such as the participant's broad geographic identity, education level, distractions while taking part, and past exposure to the King Arthur setting were also included asked for background and possible secondary analysis. Names and other identifying data were not requested so all data was anonymous. Data was stored with appropriate security, and ethical review and approval for this research obtained from the first author's university ethics committee.

RESULTS

The primary analysis conducted was a three-way independent ANOVA, with character religion, participant religion, and participant gender as the independent variables and the average of the two identification questions as the dependent variable. For the purposes of this analysis, all non-Christian participant religions were merged into a single category titled 'all other religions.' In addition, nine non-binary participants and five who preferred not to disclose their gender were excluded from the analysis, leaving 379 participants in the sample.

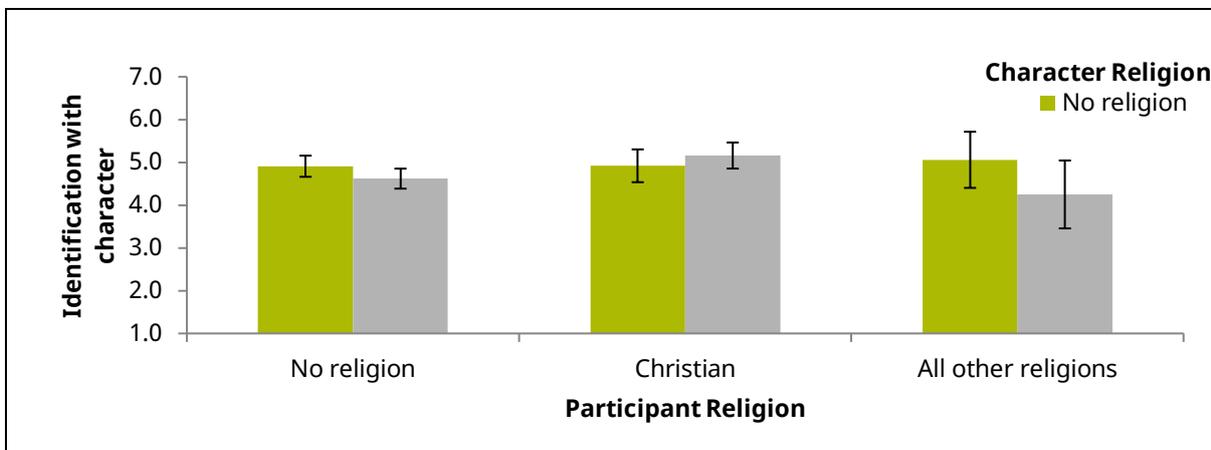
The main effect of participant gender was highly significant, $F(1, 367) = 13.00, p < .001, \eta^2 p = .03$, with men showing a higher level of identification with the character than women. However, there were no other significant effects, including the hypothesised two-way interaction of participant religion by character religion, $F(1, 367) = 0.42, p = .655$, and the three-way interaction, $F(1, 367) = 0.54, p = .585$. Means and standard deviations for all conditions are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
 Means (Standard Deviations) and Numbers of Participants in Each of the Groups Present in the Main Analysis

Participant religion	Men		Women	
	Character with no religion	Christian character	Character with no religion	Christian Character
None	4.91(1.15) N = 83	4.62 (1.19) N = 99	4.29 (1.16) N = 24	3.97 (1.41) N = 30
Christian	4.92 (1.19) N = 37	5.16 (1.03) N = 44	4.50 (1.41) N = 11	4.09 (1.46) N = 11
All other religions	5.06 (1.34) N = 16	4.25 (1.62) N = 16	3.92 (1.07) N = 6	3.50 (0.71) N = 2

Due to the large percentage of men in the sample (75%), combined with the highly significant main effect of gender, post hoc two-way analyses of variance were conducted on the data from men and women separately. The results for men showed weak evidence for an interaction between participant and character religion, $F(2, 289) = 2.57, p = .078, \eta^2 p = .02$. Figure 1 suggests that while the character of no religion was identified with equally by all male participants, when the character was Christian, there was higher identification by Christian participants and lower identification by participants of other religions. The main effects of participant religion, $F(2, 289) = 1.87, p = .156$, and character religion, $F(1, 289) = 2.69, p = .102$, did not reach significance.

Figure 1
 The Interaction of Participant and Character Religion on Identification with Character for Male Participants Only



Nine out of the 16 men following non-Christian religions who viewed the Christian character selected 'other religion' ($M = 4.17$); two selected Muslim ($M = 4.50$); one selected each of Buddhist, Hindu and Jewish ($M = 5.30$); and two preferred not to say ($M = 2.75$).

The same two-way ANOVA on the identification of women with the character showed no significant effects of participant religion, $F(2, 78) = 0.47, p = .624$, character religion, $F(1, 78) = 0.82, p = .367$, nor an interaction, $F(2, 78) = 0.01, p = .990$.

Exploratory analysis

A stepwise linear regression was performed on the data from participants who viewed the Christian character. Predictors made available to the model were age, gender, religion (seven dummy codes), importance of religion (7-point Likert item), country (six dummy codes), degree (three dummy codes), device (two dummy codes), and distractions. Using an entry criteria of $p < .100$, seven predictors were added to the model, the coefficients of which can be seen in Table 2. The directions of the coefficients suggest that the Christian character was identified with more highly by men, by participants who rate religion as important to them, and by people who follow the Hindu religion. On the other hand, lower identification with the character was found among participants who used a mobile phone for the story-game, by following other religions or the Jewish religion, and by those who stated that experiencing a good story with strong narrative or drama is the most important aspect when role-playing.

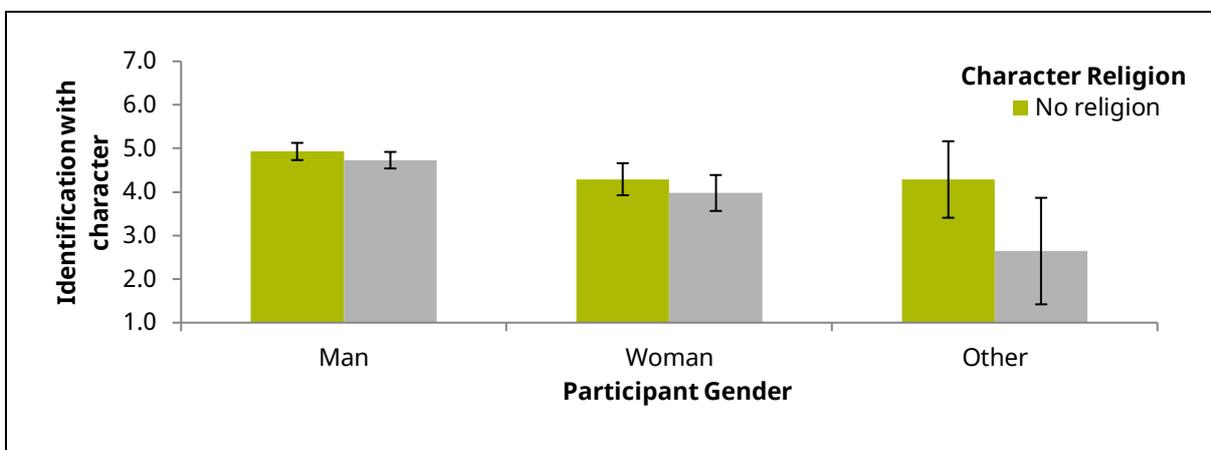
Table 2
Predictors of Identification with the Christian Character

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>
(Constant)	4.069	0.254		16.023	<.001
Importance of religion	0.177	0.041	0.288	4.350	<.001
Gender	0.629	0.205	0.200	3.068	0.002
Hindu	2.840	1.186	0.155	2.395	0.018
Device Phone	-0.378	0.170	-0.145	-2.218	0.028
Other Religion	-0.706	0.368	-0.124	-1.921	0.056
Jewish	-2.434	1.201	-0.133	-2.027	0.044
RPG Narrative	-0.336	0.173	-0.127	-1.940	0.054

The final stage of the exploratory analysis was to look at the participants who were previously excluded due to being of non-binary preferring not to disclose their gender identity. None of these 14 participants identified as Christian, an association which was statistically significant, $\chi^2(4) = 16.11, p = .003$.

A two-way ANOVA (ignoring participant religion) was conducted which resulted in significant main effects for both gender, $F(2, 387) = 16.97, p < .001, \eta^2 p = .08$, and character religion, $F(1, 387) = 8.97, p = .003, \eta^2 p = .02$. There was weak evidence of an interaction, $F(2, 387) = 2.31, p = .101, \eta^2 p = .01$. Figure 2 suggests that this was due to low identification with the Christian character by participants who were either non-binary or preferred not to disclose their gender.

Figure 2
The Interaction Between Participant Gender and Character Religion on Character Identification



Discussion of results

While there was some weak evidence of differences in identification on the basis of religion for males, the overall lack of evidence was somewhat surprising. This implies a general lack of in-group bias in identification on the basis of religion. This was unexpected as religious group bias is well documented both other research and familiar in everyday experience. The lack of shared-religion bias was consistent with the previous research by Hunter (2010). In contrast, Cairns et al. (2010) did find in-group bias among Christian groups, but these findings may be particular to their Northern Ireland research context with a long history of conflict.

One possible explanation is that identity functions differently to identification with fictional characters and the concepts from Social Identity Theory do not generalise well to identification with fictional characters. As discussed above religion can be considered a personal characteristic identity (Burke & Stets, 2009) rather than a social group identity. This might also explain why the predictions from Social Identity Theory did not seem to apply here.

Hook (2019) found that women but not men display in-group bias in identification on the basis of gender identity. This raised the question of whether this finding would generalise to other identities. By finding no evidence for in-group bias in identification on the basis of religious identity, this experiment implies that Hook's findings do not generalise to religious identity. This highlights the importance of avoiding assumptions that findings about one identity generalise to another. For this reason, future discovery of underlying general principles of identification may prove extremely difficult.

Leaving aside the topic of religious group bias, there was strong evidence here for a gender difference in identification; women identified less strongly with the male character than men did. While this was not a full replication, this is consistent with the findings of Hook (2019). This pattern of results demonstrated the importance of analysing genders separately when researching identification, especially if the weak evidence for an interaction between participant and character religion in the male participant data but not the female is considered as an indication of gender differences in the variables that affect identification.

While the evidence was weak, the results were suggestive that that men who follow non-Christian religions identified less with a Christian character than other men did. Examination of the means suggested that this was especially the case for those who selected the 'other religion' category (which includes 'pagan' faiths). One speculation is that this reflects participant religions which were historically persecuted by Christians.

Reflection on the method

This experiment built upon a new experimental method first published in Hook (2019). As noted above it generated further evidence in support of those findings and extended the understanding of those results. From a psychology perspective, this research shows how a game can be used as an experimental stimulus. The digital nature of many games lend themselves to the experimental method and efficiently support recruiting a much larger pool of participants than would otherwise be practical. Modern tools make it relatively easy to create a small novel game for research purposes. Arguably, the use of game-like elements in experiments is nothing new. Hook (2012) discusses how many classic psychology experiments could be considered game-like.

From the perspective of the game studies discipline, this continuing strand of research brings the rarely used experimental method into a relatively new discipline, in contrast to research that draws on the traditions of other disciplines. It demonstrates how concrete hypotheses can be tested to create evidence-based insights. Methodologies that game studies derive from other disciplines have an important role in forming concepts and generating hypotheses, but there is certainly more need for formal definition and testing of these hypotheses in game studies.

Practical applications of the findings

One practical application of this finding is in informing artistic creation. Identification is believed to increase audience engagement (Green & Jenkins, 2014) and enjoyment (Blake, 2012), so for media concerned with telling stories about characters such as novels, films and some games this finding is relevant. It informs us that the character's religion is unlikely to affect audience engagement positively or negatively. A central protagonist being Christian does not appear to alienate non-Christian readers. This might be particularly important commercially if the target audience is in a particularly secular country. This might also apply to other fields where identification with a character is a design goal, such as advertising and marketing (e.g., celebrity brand management).

Implications for future research

Given the repeated results of finding a gender difference in identification, a key point for future research is to control for this difference by considering different genders separately when researching identification. It may also be worth recording religious group in future experiments, even if only for secondary analysis purposes to see if there is further support for the weak evidence found for male participants.

Given the findings of differences in identification bias comparing gender identity and religious identity, an important message is that findings about one identity should not be assumed to generalise to other identities. This makes developing generalised rules about the mechanisms of identification extremely challenging.

One outstanding research question to explore is what extent findings about identification ('I identify with...') generalise to identity ('I identify as...'), and vice versa. While Ben-Ner et al. (2009) found in-group bias based on religion but not on gender, experiments with identification found in-group bias for gender but not religion, and only for one gender identity. This suggests findings do not generalise across the topics as might have been assumed.

Another more modest extension of this research would be to repeat it with different identities. Given that men have not shown any bias in identification based on gender or religion, further research might be particularly interesting to shed light on when men do display shared-identity bias in identification.

Replications of experiments such as this with a graphical computer game rather than a text story-game would be interesting to see how the results generalise across different kinds of media. Another option would be comparing an interactive stimulus such as HF with a conventional short story to see if the addition of agency changes the pattern of identification.

CONCLUSION

This research has further tested a new experimental design and producing surprising results suggestive of no identification bias on the basis of religious identity and good further evidence of identification bias on the basis of gender identity. This exposes the complex nuances of the process of identification and has practical implications for literary creation.

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