

## **Enjoyment of Murder Mystery Game Reality Shows: The Influence of Affective Disposition, Suspense and Parasocial Interactions**

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Murder mystery game reality shows become a popular media entertainment in China. To figure out what factors contribute to the popularity of this new type of reality show, the current study seeks to examine the roles of the crime narrative and the celebrities in audiences' enjoyment of the shows. Our study integrates the affective disposition model, the concept of suspense, the meaning transfer model, and the theory of parasocial interactions. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 350 respondents in China in 2022. The results show that audiences' liking of the celebrities who play detective roles in the reality shows is significantly transferred to their liking of the detectives. The impact of audiences' liking of the detectives on their enjoyment is mediated by the audience's suspenseful feelings gained in the crime narrative of the reality shows. Besides, the audience's parasocial interactions with the detectives mediate the relationship between their liking of the detectives and their suspenseful feelings. The implications of this research are discussed concerning the development of the affective disposition model in a new entertainment genre.

*Keywords: reality shows, visual communication, audience analysis, suspense, celebrity, murder mystery game*

Recently, a new type of reality shows—murder mystery game reality shows—has risen to be a popular media entertainment in China. Murder mystery reality shows target a niche market of young and highly educated audiences who are particularly fond of suspense and murder mysteries (Fengmangzhiku, 2017). In murder mystery game reality shows, participants are involved to solve mysterious murder cases based on their own abilities (Paybarah & Niu, 2021). Compared with conventional reality shows displaying ordinary people and deemphasizing the script (Hill, 2002; Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003; Ytreberg,

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2009), murder mystery game reality shows often invite celebrities to perform roles of the detectives, the suspects, and the murderers in the crime narrative (Paybarah & Niu, 2021). It is evident that murder mystery game reality shows are more scripted. Although most reality shows appeal to audiences with the unscripted nature and ordinary people (Nabi et al., 2003), murder mystery game reality shows attract large audiences with the presence of a strong crime script and celebrities.

The first murder mystery game reality show, *Who's the Murderer* (C. He, 2016), launched by the streaming media Mango TV, has been welcomed by audiences greatly since 2016. The seven seasons of *Who's the Murderer* (C. He, 2016, 2017; S. He, 2018, 2019, 2020; S. He & Chen, 2021; Yan, 2022) received many views, with each season reaping around 3.7 billion views averagely (Pandeyee, 2022). *Who's the Murderer* (C. He, 2016, 2017; S. He, 2018, 2019, 2020; S. He & Chen, 2021; Yan, 2022) was also rated positively by audiences. On the review-aggregation website Douban.com (the Chinese version of IMDb), most of the seven seasons of *Who's the Murderer* (C. He, 2016, 2017; S. He, 2018, 2019, 2020; S. He & Chen, 2021; Yan, 2022) scored eight of 10 (Douban, 2022). The success of *Who's the Murderer* (C. He, 2016, 2017; S. He, 2018, 2019, 2020; S. He & Chen, 2021; Yan, 2022) gave rise to more murder mystery game reality shows on the Internet. Aside from *Who's the Murderer* (C. He, 2016, 2017; S. He, 2018, 2019, 2020; S. He & Chen, 2021; Yan, 2022), Mango TV has launched another murder mystery game reality show called *Detective School* (S. He & Sun, 2019) since 2019. Following Mango TV, iQIYI and YOUKU, two leading streaming media in China, have had their fingers in the pie. Since May 2021, iQIYI has released several murder mystery game reality shows like *Cute Detectives* (Wu, 2021), *Game of Shark* (Yu, 2021), and *Last Winner* (Chen, 2021), and YOUKU launched shows like *Big Deal* (You, 2021) and *Show Up! Suspect* (Yinhe, 2021). However, unlike *Who's the Murderer*, most of the newly created shows got a cold shoulder in the market. Audiences complained that some of the new shows overemphasized spontaneity while ignoring the crime narrative. For instance, in *Cute Detectives* (Wu, 2021), audiences dislike it as celebrities engaged more in causal chatting than in solving the murder cases with logical reasoning (Douban, 2021). On the other hand, there were audiences not satisfied with the absence of celebrities. Compared with *Who's the Murderer* (C. He, 2016, 2017; S. He, 2018, 2019, 2020; S. He & Chen, 2021; Yan, 2022), Mango TV *Detective School* (S. He & Sun, 2019) had fewer views since all the participants were ordinary people instead of celebrities. The audiences' different responses to *Who's the Murderer* (C. He, 2016, 2017; S. He, 2018, 2019, 2020; S. He & Chen, 2021; Yan, 2022) and the new shows suggest that both the crime narrative and celebrities are important for attracting audiences to murder mystery game reality shows. Therefore, the current study seeks to examine the influence of the script and celebrities on audiences' enjoyment of murder mystery game reality shows, two factors not highlighted in the investigation of most other reality shows.

Our investigation builds on the affective disposition model and the concept of suspense (Comisky & Bryant, 1982; Raney, 2003; Zillmann, 1996), the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989), as well as the theory of parasocial interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Schramm & Hartmann 2008). The affective disposition model argues that audiences' liking of the media character contributes to their enjoyment of media entertainment and that audiences' feelings of suspense play a mediating role in this relationship (Raney, 2003; Zillmann, 1996). Applying the model, this study proposes to investigate the influence of audiences' liking of characters in murder mystery game reality shows, and their feelings of suspense during the crime narrative on their enjoyment. By focusing on murder mystery game reality shows, this study also

aims to expand the area of affective disposition inquiry, since previous research adopting the affective disposition model mainly investigated audiences' enjoyment of scripted dramas and sports events (De Wied & Zillmann, 1996; Knobloch-Westerwick, David, Eastin, Tamborini, & Greenwood, 2009; Peterson & Raney, 2008; Raney, 2003; Zillmann, 1996).

Recent studies of the affective disposition model developed the original argument by adding audiences' long-term affective disposition, the liking of the celebrity who plays the character, to their situational affective disposition, the liking of the character (Hartmann, Stuke, & Daschmann, 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2009; Shafer, 2014). In line with this development, our research examines the relationship between celebrity likeability and character likeability in the context of murder mystery game reality shows, as celebrities are invited to play different roles in the crime narrative normally (Paybarah & Niu, 2021). Meanwhile, considering that such a relationship has only been investigated empirically by previous research, we work to strengthen the theoretical connection between celebrity likeability and character likeability by incorporating the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989) with the affective disposition model.

According to the affective disposition model, audiences' suspenseful feelings are important in eliciting audiences' enjoyment. However, the mechanism of generating suspenseful feelings has not been discussed thoroughly. The existing literature mainly explained by logic that audiences' liking of the character enhances their perspective-taking, which facilitates their suspenseful feelings toward the character (Zillmann, 1996). Murder mystery game reality shows, with ample opportunities for audiences to engage in parasocial interactions, provide a good context to understand the mechanism further. Studies of parasocial interactions demonstrated that the liking of the character facilitates audiences' parasocial interactions (Liebers & Schramm, 2019; Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Parasocial interactions have been found to strengthen audiences' identification with the character (Brown, 2009; Brown & De Matviuk, 2010; Oliver et al., 2019; Tian & Yoo, 2015). Therefore, our research also intends to examine audiences' parasocial interactions as a predictor of their suspenseful feelings to enrich the affective disposition model.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Affective Dispositions, Suspense, and Enjoyment***

Affective disposition model is most often used to explain audiences' enjoyment of the different forms of media entertainment and the mediating role of suspense. The model asserts that audiences' affective dispositions toward the character in various media genres influence their enjoyment (Raney, 2003). By definition, affective dispositions refer to the audiences' degrees of likes and dislikes of the character in the viewing process (Zillmann, 1996). Audiences find the media entertainment enjoyable when the character they like receives positive outcomes, whereas they do not relish it when the character they like encounters negative outcomes (Comisky & Bryant, 1982; Raney, 2003). In addition to audiences' affective dispositions, suspense is regarded as the key element contributing to audiences' enjoyment of media entertainment, including thrillers, sci-fi, action adventure, as well as sports events (De Wied & Zillmann, 1996; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2009; Peterson & Raney, 2008). Affective disposition theory suggests a mediating role of suspense. Audiences' liking of characters exerts influence on their suspenseful feelings, which in turn

facilitates their enjoyment (Zillmann, 1996). Suspenseful feelings are conceptualized as audiences' mixed emotional state of hope and fear when consuming media entertainment (Madrigal, Bee, & Chen, 2022). Immersed in the media narrative, especially plots with uncertainties, audiences fear that the characters they favor might have misfortunes since they simultaneously hope that their favored characters acquire benefits (Zillmann, 1996). For instance, in viewing sports events, audiences fear that their favorite athletes might lose the competition because they hope that their favorite athletes become the winners (Hall, 2015). In other words, audiences' fears and hopes concerning the fates of their liked characters constitute their suspenseful feelings. The liking of the character is indispensable in generating suspenseful feelings (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2009; Zillmann, 1996). Normally, audiences tend not to worry about the fates of the characters to whom they feel indifferent (Zillmann, 1996). Their emotional responses—the fear and hope about certain outcomes—mainly derive from empathizing with their liked character (Hartmann et al., 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2009; Zillmann, 1996). When the expected resolutions come after the suspenseful plots, audiences tend to have great enjoyment (Bryant & Miron, 2003; Shafer, 2014; Zillmann, 1996). Enjoyment, based on the theory of happiness, includes both hedonic enjoyment and eudaimonia (Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008). In the context of media consumption, scholars demonstrated that audiences find media entertainment enjoyable in ways of pleasure as well as meaningfulness (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011). In sum, the disposition model claims that audiences' hedonic enjoyment and eudaimonic appreciation of media entertainment are the functions of audiences' affective dispositions, which is mediated by the feelings of suspense.

The affective disposition model and conceptualization of suspense have been developed to investigate the enjoyment of scripted dramas initially, and then extended to the realm of sports events. Nevertheless, few studies have applied the theory to explain audiences' enjoyment of reality shows. In extending the theory from scripted dramas to sports events, Peterson and Raney (2008) reasoned that sports events, with the liked athlete or team having the possibility of lagging behind and being defeated, include all the key components in the disposition theory that are attributed to scripted dramas. In a similar vein, it could be argued that the disposition theory is applicable to murder mystery game reality shows. Murder mystery game reality shows also contain the liked characters having chances of encountering negative outcomes. In murder mystery game reality shows, popular celebrities are often invited to play detectives, suspects, and a murderer of a crime narrative (Paybarah & Niu, 2021). The detectives are the key roles, as they are expected to solve the murder mystery case—searching for clues and evidence to find the murderer from the suspects (Paybarah & Niu, 2021). The disposition model holds that audiences, by witnessing the character's virtues and admirable attributes in the unfolding of dramas or sports events, form a favorable affective disposition toward him or her (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2009; Zillmann, 1996). In murder mystery game reality shows, by watching the detectives' virtues such as ingenuity and conscientiousness, it is reasonable to speculate that audiences tend to favor the detectives. Additionally, the detectives often receive positive outcomes in the shows. A review of the latest season of the popular murder mystery game reality show, *Who's the Murderer* (Yan, 2022), revealed that the detectives seized the murderer successfully in nine of the 11 murder mystery cases (Mango TV, 2022). By the definition of suspenseful feelings (Madrigal et al., 2022; Zillmann, 1996), audiences, in favor of the detectives in murder mystery game reality shows, tend to hope that the detectives catch the murderers successfully while worrying about their failures. Then, it is reasonable to

speculate that feelings of suspense are generated when audiences are watching the shows. Thus, following the affective disposition model, we predict that:

*H1.1: Audiences' liking of the detectives associates positively with their enjoyment of murder mystery game reality shows.*

*H1.2: The feelings of suspense mediate the relationships between audiences' liking of the detectives and enjoyment of murder mystery game reality shows.*

### ***The Disposition Model: Celebrity Likeability and Character Likeability***

In the explanation of audiences' feelings of suspense and enjoyment, as has been stated, affective dispositions are specified as the temporary liking of the character (Zillmann, 1996). The assumption behind the liking of the character is that affective dispositions are developed during the consumption of media entertainment (Hartmann et al., 2008). Admittedly, the liking of the character is shaped over the course of media consumption, but audiences are not neutral persons before they start media consumption (Hartmann et al., 2008). Therefore, some scholars claimed that the concept of affective dispositions should take fandom into account (Hartmann et al., 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2009; Shafer, 2014). Specifically, Knobloch-Westerwick et al. (2009) regarded affective dispositions as consisting of situational affective disposition, the liking of the character formed in the middle of the media narrative, and habitual fandom, the liking of the celebrity who plays the character. Along this line of argumentation, Shafer (2014) extended the original disposition model by successfully testing the hypothesis that a stronger habitual fandom predicts a more positive situational disposition. Although habitual fandom is recognized as an important factor added to the affective disposition model, it is loosely defined in the literature. Existing studies such as Knobloch-Westerwick and colleague's (2009) study and Shafer's (2014) study mainly treated habitual fandom as fandom but failed to conceptualize it clearly. The current study introduces the well-developed concept of celebrity likeability (McGuire, 1985) in celebrity studies to conceptualize habitual fandom. Habitual fandom, according to the affective disposition model literature (Hartmann et al., 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2009; Shafer, 2014), is equivalent to celebrity likeability (McGuire, 1985). Both concepts emphasize audiences' liking of celebrities. As suggested by McGuire (1985), celebrity likeability refers to the audience's liking of the celebrities because of their physical appearances and behaviors. As stated in the classic source attractiveness model, celebrity likeability is one of the three main characteristics celebrities acquire, which could significantly influence the communication effectiveness of celebrities (McGuire, 1985). Therefore, the concept of "celebrity likeability" was adopted in our study.

Existing studies found that celebrity likeability and character likeability are significantly correlated (Shafer, 2014). However, few theoretical justifications were provided to explain the relationship through extant studies. To fill the gap, our study aims to explore the relationship between celebrity likeability and character likeability by using the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989) in celebrity studies. Specifically, celebrities are cultural figures that contain meanings (McCracken, 1989). In the communication process, celebrities' symbolic meanings such as likeability could be transferred to given products through carefully crafted messages (McCracken, 1989). Dramas, sports events, and reality shows are popular media entertainment products with well-designed narratives and characters. By the logic of the meaning transfer

model (McCracken, 1989), the perceived favorable meaning of the celebrity could be imparted to the character the celebrity plays via the delicate narratives in the different forms of media entertainment. Murder mystery game reality shows, as mentioned before, invite crowd-pleasing celebrities to be the characters in the crime narratives. The crime narratives in the shows are fashioned carefully to match the likeable features of the celebrities to that of the characters—the detectives they perform. In this way, the celebrity likeability could be transferred to the detectives in murder mystery game reality shows. Therefore, based on Shafer's (2014) development of the disposition model and logic of meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989), we propose that:

*H2: Audiences' liking of the celebrities (who play detectives) associates positively with audiences' liking of the detectives.*

### ***The Disposition Model and Parasocial Interactions***

In the disposition model, as has been discussed, audiences' feelings of suspense are a function of their liking of the characters. One explanation of the dispositions' generation of suspense is audiences' empathic reaction (Zillmann, 1996). Positive affective dispositions toward the characters contribute to audiences' emotional perspective-taking with the characters (Hartmann et al., 2008; Peterson & Raney 2008; Zillmann, 1996). Audiences, who put themselves into the characters' places, elicit anticipations and apprehensions about outcomes that might occur to the characters (Madrigal, Bee, Chen, & LaBarge, 2011; Peterson & Raney 2008; Zillmann, 1996). Since empathic role taking with the liked characters is important for engendering suspense, the current research proposes to add parasocial interactions into the disposition model for our investigation of audiences' suspenseful feelings of murder mystery game reality shows. Murder mystery game reality shows contain ample opportunities for audiences to engage in parasocial interactions. Studies of parasocial interactions demonstrated that the liking of the character facilitates audiences' parasocial interactions (Liebers & Schramm, 2019; Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Parasocial interactions have been found to strengthen audiences' identification with the character (Brown, 2009; Brown & De Matviuk, 2010; Oliver et al., 2019; Tian & Yoo, 2015). Then, it is reasonable to speculate that audiences' parasocial interactions elicit the feelings of suspense.

The parasocial phenomenon, first examined by Horton and Wohl (1956), refers to an imaginary, one-sided social interaction between audiences and the media characters. The parasocial engagement has been investigated in two directions: one focuses on audiences' interactions with the media characters during media consumption, that is parasocial interactions; the other centers on audiences' cross-situational relationships with the media characters over repeated media consumption, that is parasocial relationships (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Liebers & Schramm, 2019; Oliver et al., 2019; Schramm & Hartmann 2008). The current research pays attention to the short-term parasocial interactions rather than the long-term parasocial relationships. Specifically, we adopt Schramm and Hartmann's (2008) conceptualization of parasocial interactions as parasocial processing, which refers to processes of audiences' cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions to the media characters, since we intend to probe into the roles of parasocial interactions in the disposition model that emphasizes the process of media consumption.

The relationship between the liking of the character and parasocial interactions has been investigated a lot. Tian and Hoffner (2010) demonstrated that audiences have stronger parasocial interactions with the liked characters, compared with characters they feel neutral about or they dislike. Liebers and Schramm's (2019) review of studies about parasocial experience with media characters showed that audiences' perceived attractiveness of media characters reinforces their parasocial interactions. Moreover, it is believed that audiences' favorable attitudes toward media characters facilitate their investments of time and efforts to engage with media characters, which are found to enhance the development of parasocial interactions. Perse and Rubin's (1989) study proved that the length of time in which audiences are exposed to soap operas contributes to the perceived parasocial interactions with the characters in the soap operas. The findings were reconfirmed in Bond's (2018) study about gender minorities' view about media characters as well as McLaughlin and Macafee's (2019) study about political figures.

To facilitate suspense, it is important that parasocial interactions enhance audiences' empathic reactions. Brown (2009) found that parasocial interactions with the religious celebrity Pope John Paul II could lead audiences to identify with him. In the study of the famous athlete Diego Maradona (Brown & De Matviuk, 2010), it was revealed that parasocial interactions strengthen audiences' identification. Tian and Yoo's (2015) investigation of cast members in a reality show demonstrated that interacting with cast members parasocially induces audiences to take cast members' perspectives. Likewise, Oliver and colleagues (2019) found that parasocial interactions with antiheroes in a TV series are related to heightened identification. Identification, as Cohen (2001) stated, emphasizes that audiences are in the characters' shoes. In this way, audiences' pseudointerpersonal engagement facilitates them to take the position of, or even imagine being with the character (Brown, 2015). As audiences put themselves in the position of media characters, they are likely to feel with them, generating hopes that positive outcomes would arrive and worries that deplorable events would intervene. Therefore, synthesizing studies about the liking of the characters and parasocial interactions, as well as those about parasocial interactions and identification, we postulate that:

*H3.1: Audiences' liking of the detectives associates positively with their feelings of suspense.*

*H3.2: Parasocial interactions with the detectives mediate the relationship between audiences' liking of the detectives and their feelings of suspense.*

### **Method**

To test the proposed model about audiences' enjoyment of murder mystery game reality shows, a cross-sectional survey was conducted with 350 respondents in China in July 2022. All respondents were voluntarily recruited via PowerCX, the alternative of MTurk in China. A survey questionnaire was designed on a selected murder mystery game reality show, titled *Who's the Murderer* (Yan, 2022). *Who's the Murderer* was chosen as it has been the leading reality show featuring celebrities playing whodunits in China (Mao, 2021; Paybarah & Niu, 2021). The questionnaire consists of three main parts, including screening questions, audiences' perceptions and attitudes toward the reality show, and demographic details. Research ethics (Ref. No. REC-2022-04) was approved by the Research Ethics Committee from the authors' college before data collection was conducted.

### **Sampling**

A purposive sampling method was used in our study as murder mystery game reality shows are still new in China, and not all Chinese audiences have experience in watching the reality shows. Therefore, two screening questions were asked to screen out the qualified participants. Only audiences, aged 18 or above, who have watched the latest season of *Who's the Murderer* (Yan, 2022) could participate in the survey. Overall, 350 respondents were recruited. Well-educated young adults from developed cities mainly participated in our study. Specifically, 41.7% of the respondents were aged 26 to 35, followed by 40% of respondents from the age group of 18 to 25. The remaining 18.2% of respondents were aged 36 or above. In terms of their educational backgrounds, 289 respondents were college students. Thirty-eight survey participants were postgraduates, while the remaining 23 individuals were less educated. Among the 350 respondents, 78% of them were living in the first-tier and second-tier cities in China. Apart from the latest season of *Who's the Murderer*, 88.6% of respondents also had watched other seasons of the selected reality show.

### **Measurements**

Well-developed measurement scales selected from extant studies were adopted to test the key variables in the proposed model.

Specifically, both celebrity likeability and the liking of characters emphasized audiences' emotional responses in the form of liking. The only difference between the two variables was that celebrity likeability focused on the celebrity him or herself, whereas affective disposition toward characters mainly addressed the characters celebrities played in reality shows. As for affective disposition toward characters such as detectives, respondents were asked to indicate their overall attitudes toward characters as a group, because celebrities swapped the roles they played in each episode of the selected reality show. To measure audiences' emotional responses to the celebrities and the characters they played, Tripp, Jensen, and Carlson's (1994) likeability scale was adopted. Likeability refers to the affection of the person (McGuire, 1985). To measure it, three 7-point semantic differential items were used, including "very likeable/very unlikeable, very pleasant/very unpleasant," and "very agreeable/very disagreeable." The reliability performance was satisfactory ( $\alpha = .75$ ). Overall, the respondents liked the celebrities ( $M = 5.72$ ;  $SD = 0.93$ ) and the characters (the detective roles) they played in the murder mystery game reality shows ( $M = 5.71$ ;  $SD = 0.87$ ).

Parasocial interaction was conceptualized as audiences' short-term responses in the cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels when they watch the characters and their performances on media (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). To measure it, Schramm and Hartmann's (2008) scale was adopted and modified as their measurement scale included all three levels' responses. To fit China's context, nine items with a 7-point Likert scale, such as "I carefully followed the behavior of the character in *Who's the Murderer*" were used to measure this variable. The reliability performance was good ( $\alpha = .82$ ). Respondents, on average, admitted their cognitive, affective, and behavioral interactions with the characters ( $M = 5.37$ ;  $SD = 0.81$ ).

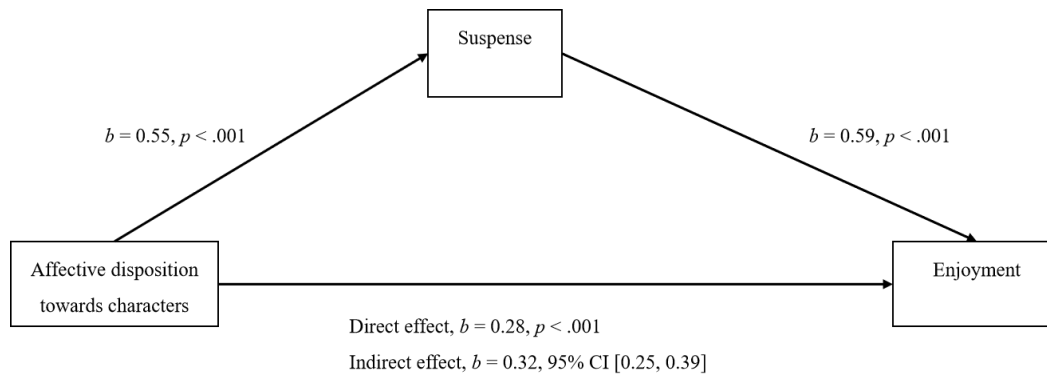


Suspense was defined as a mixed emotional state that consists of audiences' anticipation for favorable outcomes for their liked characters and anxiety about negative consequences amid the uncertain narrative (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2009; Peterson & Raney, 2008; Zillmann, 1996). Peterson and Raney's (2008) eight-item scale like "I found murder cases in *Who's the Murderer* to be very suspenseful" was used to measure suspense with a 7-point Likert scale. The reliability performance was good ( $\alpha = .81$ ). The results showed that the murder cases in the murder mystery game reality shows were somewhat suspenseful ( $M = 5.38$ ;  $SD = 0.86$ ) from respondents' perspectives.

Enjoyment, in conceptualization, includes hedonic pleasure and appreciation (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Enjoyment was measured by items adapted from Oliver and Bartsch's (2010) measurement scale. Three items from the "fun" dimension, such as "It was fun for me to watch *Who's the Murderer*" and three items from the "moving/thought-provoking" dimension such as "*Who's the Murderer* was thought-provoking" (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010) were used. These items were all rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The reliability performance was good ( $\alpha = .82$ ). The study found that respondents had an overall pleasant feeling about the reality shows and appreciated that ( $M = 5.64$ ;  $SD = 0.83$ ).

## Results

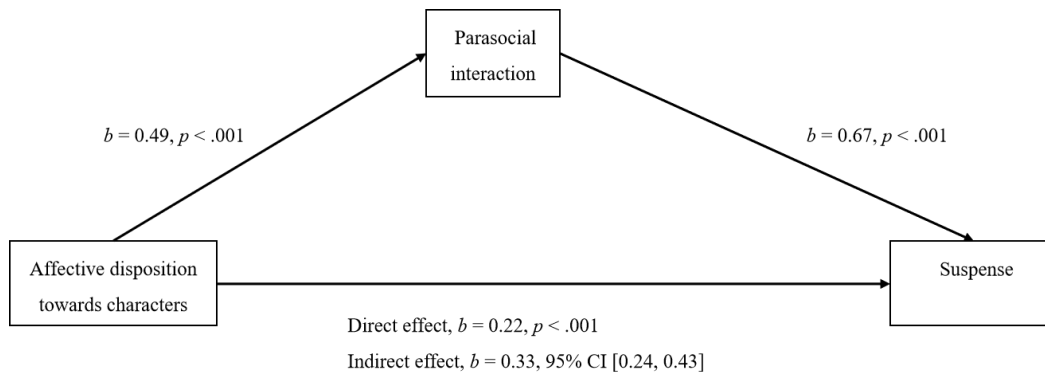
Mediation effect analysis processed by the SPSS plug-in PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) was conducted to test (1) how the influence of affective disposition toward characters on the audience's enjoyment of the reality shows was mediated by the perceived suspense, and (2) how the impact of affective disposition toward characters on the audience's perceived suspense was mediated by parasocial interactions between the characters and audience. According to Hayes (2013), Model 4 in the PROCESS was applied to test the mediation effect. Specifically, when the perceived suspense was not introduced as a mediator to the model, the total effect of affective disposition toward characters on the audiences' enjoyment was significant and positive ( $b = 0.60$ ,  $t = 15.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The model explained 40.54% of the variance of audiences' enjoyment. Therefore, H1.1 was supported. After the perceived suspense as a mediator was included in the model, the mediation effect occurred. Figure 1 summarizes the results. It indicated that there was a significant indirect effect of affective disposition toward characters on the audiences' enjoyment through perceived suspense ( $b = 0.32$ , 95% CI [0.25, 0.39],  $p < .001$ ). Therefore, we confirmed that H1.2 was supported.



**Figure 1. Audiences' suspenseful feelings as the mediator between their affective disposition toward characters and their enjoyment.**

Simple linear regression was conducted to test how celebrity likeability influenced audiences' affective disposition toward characters they played in the murder mystery game reality shows. The results showed that celebrity likeability positively affected audiences' affective disposition toward characters they played in the reality shows ( $b = 0.67, t = 19.00, p < .001$ ). If the degree of celebrity likeability increased by one, audiences' positive feelings about the characters they played would improve by 0.67. Overall, 50.8% of the variance of audiences' affective disposition toward characters could be explained by a celebrity's likeability. Therefore, H2 was supported.

To test H3, Model 4 in the PROCESS was applied again. The total effect of affective disposition toward characters on the perceived suspense was significant ( $b = 0.55, t = 12.50, p < .001$ ). In other words, when parasocial interactions were not included in the model, affective disposition toward characters positively predicted the perceived suspense. The model explained 30.98% of the variance of perceived suspense. Therefore, H3.1 was supported. As for the mediation effect of parasocial interaction, Figure 2 showed that there was a significant indirect effect of affective disposition toward characters on perceived suspense through parasocial interaction between the characters and audience ( $b = 0.33, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.24, 0.43], p < .001$ ). In other words, the parasocial interaction mediated the relationship between affective disposition toward characters and perceived suspense, and H3.2 was supported.



**Figure 2. Audience's parasocial interaction with characters as the mediator between their affective disposition toward characters and their suspenseful feelings.**

### Discussion

In this research, we mainly integrated the affective disposition model (Comisky & Bryant, 1982; Raney, 2003; Zillmann, 1996) with the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989), and the concept of parasocial interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008) to examine why audiences take pleasure in watching murder mystery game reality shows, a new type of reality show that put more emphasis on scripts and celebrities compared with conventional reality shows. Through a cross-sectional survey, we found that audiences' liking of the detectives in the shows contributes to their enjoyment of the shows. And this relationship is mediated by audiences' suspenseful feelings generated when they follow the shows' crime narratives. We also found that audiences' favor of the celebrities beforehand influences their liking of the detectives the celebrities play in the shows. Moreover, our findings demonstrated that audiences' liking of the detectives facilitates their parasocial interactions with the detectives and that more parasocial interactions lead to stronger feelings of suspense. The findings revealed that the narrative and celebrities play important roles in the popularity of reality shows. Previous research highlighted that the unscripted nature and ordinary people unique to reality shows grab audiences' attention (Hill, 2002; Nabi et al., 2003; Ytreberg, 2009). Our study suggested that reality shows incorporate features of scripted dramas, such as suspenseful narratives, to win the audiences' hearts. With scripts in reality shows, celebrities might be a better choice than ordinary people because they are more skillful in taking the roles in the script. Though scripts are added, murder mystery game reality shows still keep the room of improvisation. Thus, our research of murder mystery game reality shows suggested that reality shows hold the audience by combining script and reality in a proper way.

Our study is one of the first empirical studies analyzing audiences' enjoyment of murder mystery game reality shows. In our analysis, we extended the area of affective disposition inquiry to murder mystery game reality shows. The central propositions in the disposition model—the impact of audiences' liking of the characters on their enjoyment and the mediating role of suspense in this relationship—were confirmed in this new form of media entertainment. The results showed that the affective disposition model could also be applied to explain audiences' enjoyment of reality shows—murder mystery game reality shows, besides scripted dramas and sports events. Murder mystery game reality shows build on

crime narratives. In the shows, the detectives, played by celebrities, are required to look for clues and find out the murderer based on their own abilities. Admittedly, the detectives in murder mystery game reality shows might be less charming than their counterparts in crime drama, since they do not have the exquisite script to guide them to get the evidence at the right moment and to perform the rigorous reasoning. Nevertheless, they are still attractive to audiences when they find the evidence after rummaging around and putting great efforts to have a logical deduction of the murder case. Audiences enjoy the shows when the detectives catch the murderer successfully. Amid the uncertainties of the crime narrative and spontaneity in the shows, audiences likewise generate suspenseful feelings such as hopes for the detectives' success and worries for their failures, which mediate the relationship between the liking of the detectives and the enjoyment.

Beyond testing the disposition model in a new context, the current research also had further investigation of the complexity of audiences' affective dispositions. In the original disposition model, audiences' affective dispositions were specified as the liking of the character (Comisky & Bryant, 1982; Raney, 2003; Zillmann, 1996). Later, some scholars proposed that audiences' affective dispositions should include both the liking of the character and the liking of the celebrities who play the character, as the latter would influence the former by logic (Hartmann et al., 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2009; Shafer, 2014). Shafer's (2014) research demonstrated a positive correlation between celebrity likeability and character likeability. Although celebrity likeability was added to the disposition model, there lacks a theoretical reasoning concerning how and why celebrity likeability influences character likeability. Our study filled this research gap by introducing the meaning transfer model. On the one hand, the meaning transfer model justifies the connection of celebrity likeability and character likeability theoretically. The core argument of this model is that the celebrity's meaning could be transferred from one media, such as the TV dramas they play, to another, such as product advertisements they perform (McCracken, 1989). Building on the logic of meaning transfer in the shifting media contexts, it could be assumed that celebrity likeability, a kind of general and abstract meaning accumulated by and imbedded in celebrities, could be transferred from celebrities as the general media product to the characters as the more specific media product. On the other hand, the meaning transfer model and the affective disposition model share a commonality. Both models focus on the source of communication. In the original affective disposition model, the characters serve as the source of audiences' affective dispositions—the positive disposition such as liking. In the meaning transfer model, the celebrities and the characters they play serve as sources of meanings—likeability—transmitted to audiences. As the source of communication in the affective disposition model is contained in the sources in the meaning transfer model, these two theoretical models are combined in this study. Accordingly, we proposed that, in the context of murder mystery game reality shows, celebrity likeability positively influences the audience's favorable feelings toward the detectives the celebrity plays. Consistent with Shafer's (2014) study, this relationship was confirmed in our research.

Another theoretical contribution related to audiences' affective dispositions is that source likeability in the source attractiveness model was included in our study to conceptualize celebrity likeability and character likeability. Previous studies applying the affective disposition model did not have satisfying definitions of the two concepts. Character likeability was regarded simply as the liking of the character (Raney, 2003; Shafer, 2014; Zillmann, 1996). As for celebrity likeability, scholars varied in their

conceptualizations. Knobloch-Westerwick and colleagues (2009) and Shafer (2014) treated celebrity likeability as fanship, whereas Hartmann et al. (2008) equated it as parasocial relationship. It is necessary to improve the conceptualization of celebrity likeability and character likeability to avoid problems in the theoretical building as well as the measurement. As discussed above, the current research integrated the meaning transfer model and the affective disposition model to study audiences' affective dispositions. According to both models, celebrities and the characters they play are the sources of audiences' affective dispositions. Therefore, source likeability, one essential trait of communicators as the source of communication (McGuire, 1985), was used in this research to define and measure celebrity likeability and character likeability. Compared with the extant studies, the conceptualization and operationalization of celebrity likeability in the way of source likeability are more solid and consistent.

In the current research, we developed the disposition model not only by elaborating the complexity of audiences' affective dispositions but also by enriching the explanation of the generation of suspenseful feelings. In the disposition model, audiences' suspenseful feelings are an important factor. Audiences' dispositions lead to their suspenseful feelings which in turn increase their enjoyment (Zillmann, 1996). The explanation of the elicitation of suspense by character likeability is that audiences tend to take the perspective of the character they like (Hartmann et al., 2008; Peterson & Raney, 2008; Zillmann, 1996). According to previous research, parasocial interactions enhance audiences' empathic perspective-taking (Brown, 2009; Brown & De Matviuk, 2010; Oliver et al., 2019; Tian & Yoo, 2015). Therefore, we added parasocial interactions with the characters to the disposition model. We examined the mediating role of parasocial interactions in the relationship between character likeability and suspense. The mediation effect of parasocial interactions was found to be significant. This finding suggested that the parasocial interactions between audiences and the characters play a critical role when audiences' liking of the characters evokes the suspenseful feelings. Specifically, as audiences have favorable disposition toward the detectives in murder mystery game reality shows, they tend to engage in parasocial interactions with them. The more parasocial interactions occur with the detectives, the greater audiences' suspenseful feelings are. The mediating role of parasocial interactions also suggests that the mechanism of the generation of suspenseful feelings should be investigated further. Although audiences' dispositions are the key factor for them to have hopes and worries about the characters, factors that play roles in between cannot be ignored. Besides parasocial interactions, further research could investigate factors such as audiences' identification or empathy as mediators in the relationship between character likeability and suspense.

Practical insights about the enhancement of the popularity of murder mystery game reality shows as well as audiences' loyalty to the shows are found in our study. The celebrity effect is of great importance in murder mystery game reality shows. Our study found that there is no gender difference in this effect. Both female ( $M = 5.74$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) and male ( $M = 5.70$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ) audiences display positive feelings toward the celebrities who participated in the shows ( $t(347) = -0.37$ ,  $p = .72$ ). This finding indicates that celebrity likeability could be used as one criterion to sort out celebrities as participants of the shows, since the liked celebrities are attractive to audiences in general. Additionally, the necessity of likeable celebrities appearing in murder mystery game reality shows lies in the connection between celebrity likeability and character likeability. Consistent with previous studies about characters in sports video games (Shafer, 2014), our results suggested that if audiences like the celebrities, they also display a positive attitude toward the characters they play in the shows. Zillmann's (1996) study argued that audiences have concerns about

the characters they like. If audiences care about the characters they like in the shows, it would motivate them to follow the shows and continue consuming its media content to figure out the fate of the characters. In this way, the popularity and audience loyalty of reality shows will be enhanced.

What's more, the findings in our research are useful for production practitioners to improve audiences' engagement with murder mystery game reality shows. According to our findings, audiences' liking of the characters in the shows plays an important role in audiences' involvement with the shows. On the one hand, we found that when audiences like the detectives in murder mystery game reality shows, they have more parasocial interactions with them. It means that audiences' liking of the characters leads them to pay attention to, allocate emotions toward, and interact behaviorally with the characters (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008) in the shows. As the characters are the key component of murder mystery game reality shows, when audiences interact with their favored characters parasocially, they have great engagement with the shows. On the other hand, this study's results demonstrated that audiences' liking of the detectives leads them to have suspenseful feelings when following the crime narratives of the shows. Audiences having suspenseful feelings indicate their engagement with the shows. Emotional engagement is one of the four dimensions of audiences' engagement with media narratives (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). Audiences' suspenseful feelings are a mixed emotional state (Madrigal et al., 2022). They anticipate that the detectives would find out the murderer, while worrying that they fail. As audiences are experiencing hopes and anxieties, they engage in the show emotionally. The two findings suggested the importance of character likeability. It is the character likeability that contributes to audiences' parasocial interactions with the characters and suspenseful feelings related to the characters. Therefore, production practitioners are advised to highlight the likeable characteristics of the characters such as the detectives' ingenuity and conscientiousness in murder mystery game reality shows. In this way, audiences' engagement with the shows would be improved.

Besides highlighting the endearing characteristics of the characters, production practitioners should also consider the consistency between the characters and the celebrities who play the characters when choosing the celebrity participants for murder mystery game reality shows. Grounding on the meaning transfer model, our study found that audiences' positive feelings toward the detectives in the shows are partly derived from their liking of the celebrities who play the detectives. Such transfer is supported by the match between the celebrities' positive and symbolic meanings and that of the detectives they play. For example, one of the celebrities named Jiong HE is a famous host liked for his sharpness. In the shows, his sharpness as a detective was also applauded by audiences. Thus, the characters assigned to celebrities in the shows should be congruent with celebrities' characteristics. This is essential as previous studies confirmed that celebrities should be logically matched and relevant to products. Otherwise, they become unnecessary risks (Watkins, 1989). According to the match-up hypothesis, if there is a congruence between the celebrities and their endorsed products, the effectiveness of communication could be improved (Kamins & Gupta, 1994; Kotler, 1997). Murder mystery game reality shows and the characters are popular media entertainment products. Celebrities' participation in murder mystery game reality shows could be seen as celebrities endorsing the shows and certain characters. When the celebrities' meanings are matched with the characters they perform, the audiences' positive response might be enhanced.

## Conclusion

Murder mystery game reality shows, featuring the crime narrative and celebrities, are popular in the media entertainment market in China recently. To understand the rise of this new entertainment genre, a cross-sectional survey was conducted with 350 respondents in China in July 2022. The results showed that audiences' positive attitudes toward celebrities who play detective roles in the shows significantly affect their positive dispositions toward the detectives, which lead to audiences' enjoyment of murder mystery game reality shows. The perceived suspense generated during the shows' crime narrative mediates the relationship between a positive disposition toward the detectives and audiences' enjoyment of the shows. Meanwhile, parasocial interactions with the detectives mediate the relationship between audiences' positive dispositions toward the detectives and perceived suspense.

Although our study is one of the first to analyze the popularity of the murder mystery game reality shows by integrating the affective disposition model and the concept of suspense (Comisky & Bryant, 1982; Raney, 2003; Zillmann, 1996), the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989), as well as the theory of parasocial interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008), limitations still exist. First, the study is limited in the generalizability of study results because of the small sample size and the use of purposive sampling method. Only 350 respondents were recruited in China to participate in the study, and their views might not effectively represent that of the target audience of murder mystery game reality shows. Future studies are suggested to repeat the same study among a larger group of media audiences. In addition, probability sampling method is recommended to be applied in future studies to further validate the study results. Second, the external validity of our study might be limited as only one season of the *Who's the Murderer* (Yan, 2022) reality show was analyzed. It is unknown whether the proposed relationship of how the crime narrative and the celebrities in audiences' enjoyment influence the popularity of murder mystery game reality shows is also applicable to other seasons of *Who's the Murderer* (C. He, 2016, 2017; S. He, 2018, 2019, 2020; S. He & Chen, 2021) or other existing murder mystery game reality shows. Future studies are suggested to target more murder mystery game reality shows and test if the proposed relationship works in other programs or seasons. Besides this, a comparative study across cultures could be done to explore the potential similarities and differences in audiences' responses to murder mystery game reality shows. Third, the measurement of celebrity likeability focused on celebrities as a group. The same logic was applied to the measurement of affective disposition toward characters. Although audiences' overall attitudes were assessed in the study, variation among specific celebrities/different characters they played in each episode was not considered. Future studies are recommended either to compare the differences in audiences' attitudes toward specific celebrities and characters they play in the reality show, or to repeat the same study but focus on one single episode of the reality show to test the audience's response. Fourth, by focusing on suspenseful feelings, this study mainly investigated audiences' emotional engagement with murder mystery game reality shows, but not audiences' narrative engagement as a whole. According to Busselle and Bilandzic (2009), narrative engagement includes audiences' narrative understanding, attentional focus, narrative presence, and emotional engagement. This study did not analyze audiences' narrative understanding, attentional focus, and narrative presence when they watch murder mystery game reality shows. Since murder mystery game reality shows are more scripted than most other reality shows with the insertion of crime narratives, future studies are recommended to have a comprehensive investigation of audience's narrative engagement with this special type of reality show.

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