METHODOLOGY

Parasocial Breakups: Measuring Individual Differences in Responses to the Dissolution of Parasocial Relationships

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A self-report measure is presented for assessing the expected reactions of television viewers to the loss of parasocial relationships. Based on three separate samples, the measure is validated and used to explore differences in how people react to parasocial breakup. Findings suggest that, although women develop stronger parasocial relationships, they do not react differently than men to expected breakup. Teens, however, expect to be more upset than adults, following parasocial breakup. Results demonstrate the construct validity of the new scale, and its potential contribution is discussed.

Parasocial relationships are those between television viewers and the characters they watch and involve feelings and reactions toward characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Although parasocial relationships are based on simulated interaction, they continue beyond the viewing period, when viewers experience characters as close friends they would like to meet. Research has demonstrated the importance of parasocial relationships: They increase motivation for television viewing (Conway & Rubin, 1991), relate to audience activity (Kim & Rubin, 1997), affect interpretation of television texts (Cohen, 2002), and enhance media effects (Basil, 1996).

Despite the original theorization of Horton and Wohl (1956) and other early assumptions, parasocial relationships do not compensate for any social deficit (Tsao,

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1996). Rather, parasocial relationships complement social relationships and are better understood as part of a viewer's social life (Caughey, 1984). It is not surprising, therefore, that evidence has been gathering in support of the similarity between parasocial and social relationships. Viewers judge characters along the same criteria as those they use to judge the people they meet (Perse & Rubin, 1989), and there are similar patterns in the development of social and parasocial relationships (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Cole and Leets (1999) found that people who are predisposed to desire intense romantic relationships also report having the strongest parasocial relationships. Thus, parasocial relationships resemble social relationships, and, although they may generally be less salient and intense than close social relationships, for many television viewers, relationships with TV characters and other celebrities are a constant, large, and important part of their social worlds (Caughey, 1984).

Parasocial relationships mostly lack the behavioral components that typify other social relationships, but they seem to share many of their emotional aspects. One of the important aspects of relationships is the impact of their dissolution (Barbara & Dion, 2000), which has serious psychological consequences (McCarthy, Lambert, & Brack, 1997), with varied responses across individuals (Sprecher, 1994). Anecdotal data exist on extreme reactions to the dissolution of parasocial relationships with celebrities (Meyrowitz, 1994), but a systematic study of parasocial breakups has yet to be conducted. In the normal course of television programming, shows go on and off the air, characters change, and actors come and go. Thus, parasocial breakup is quite common, and, although probably not as traumatic as the dissolution of a close friendship, a romantic relationship, or the death of a close friend, the sadness associated with parasocial breakup is most likely a significant and recurrent feature of viewers' emotional lives in general and of their experience with the media, more specifically.

Based on the well-documented assumptions that parasocial relationships are common and meaningful to viewers, that they resemble social relationships in many ways, and that the dissolution of social relationships is psychologically trying, it can be argued that parasocial breakup should also be a negative experience. This study seeks to present and explore a self-report measure of expected feelings toward parasocial breakups in an attempt to further the study of this phenomenon. The scale was devised on the basis of an existing scale for measuring the responses to romantic breakup (Barbara & Dion, 2000) and was tested to explore both its reliability and validity.

HYPOTHESES

To explore the concept of parasocial breakup, several hypotheses were designed to test whether theoretically expected patterns can be found across age and sex groups. It has been established that men and women behave differently in relational

contexts. Women tend to be more invested in their interpersonal relationships and have similarly been found to have stronger parasocial relationships than men (Cohen, 1997; Hoffner & Buchanan, 1998). Overall, it is reasonable to expect that the stronger and more meaningful a relationship, the more difficult its breakup will be. However, research has also found that the degree of dependence on a specific relationship mediates the association between the intensity of the relationship and the intensity of responses to its breakup. This finding has been used to explain gender differences in responses to relationship dissolution. Men seem to invest less in relationships, but because they have fewer relationships, they react as negatively as women do to the dissolution of a close relationship. Moreover, women tend to maintain many relationships and are hence more resilient to breakups (Helgeson, 1994; but see also Mearns, 1991; Simpson, 1987; and Sprecher, 1994, for different findings). It is thus expected that, although women will have stronger parasocial relationships, they will not be more fearful of parasocial breakup.

> H1:   Compared to men, women will report stronger parasocial relationships with their favorite television characters, but such sex differences will not be found in expected responses to parasocial breakup.

Parasocial relationships have special importance for teens. Celebrities provide a convenient model for social comparison, for role modeling, and for vicarious experience of alternative social identities. Thus, not surprisingly, teens are most likely to join fan clubs and to be interested in the lives of celebrities (Raviv, Bar-Tal, Raviv, & Ben-Horin, 1996). Given the general emotional vulnerability of teens, it is expected that, compared with adults, teens should have both stronger parasocial relationships and should anticipate having stronger negative responses to parasocial breakup.

> H2:   Compared to adults, teens will report stronger parasocial relationships with favorite television characters and stronger reactions to the potential breakup of parasocial relationships with them.

METHOD

Overview

Items used by Barbara and Dion (2000) to assess postbreakup reactions in interpersonal relationships were adapted to parasocial breakup. In reference to a self-selected favorite television character, respondents were asked how they would respond if the character was taken off the air. Eight items addressed postbreakup feelings: "If my favorite character were to be taken off the air, I would: feel lonely,

feel vulnerable, feel less excited about TV, feel like I lost a close friend, feel sad, miss the character, feel disappointed, feel angry." Eight others addressed postbreakup behaviors: If my favorite character were to be taken off the air, I would: watch other programs with the character, watch reruns, watch other programs, do something to change the situation, find a different character to love, look for information about the character from other sources, try to meet the character in another way, keep watching the program anyway. The items were 5-point, Likert-type items, with response options ranging from 1 (*not true at all*) to 5 (*very true*).

Respondents were asked to pick a character from any TV show, so that in their responses they could name fictitious characters, hosts, newscasters, or other TV people. They then were asked to report on their parasocial relationship with that character, using the parasocial interaction scale (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). They were then asked to imagine their responses if this character went off the air and, only after that, to complete the parasocial breakup scale. Thus, the parasocial breakup scale was presented in a hypothetical context, and respondents were asked to conjecture how they would respond to the loss of a relationship. This approach does not rely on reconstructing from memory old experiences nor does it limit respondents in choosing the character. In addition, this hypothetical method removes any variance caused by other events that may have coincided with the dissolution of a parasocial relationship and that may have affected the reactions to the breakup (e.g., the beginning or end of another relationship).

This study reports on results of the scale for three separate samples: a pretest that used a convenience sample of 124 adults, a sample of 381 adults, and a sample of 82 teens. The pretest was meant to provide an initial validation for the questionnaire as a whole, and, more specifically, for the new scale, and was based on a sample that was divided into two groups. Fifteen students participated in a research seminar, and each found 10 friends and close family members who agreed to complete questionnaires. Five completed a full questionnaire and five a shorter version, including only the parasocial relationships and parasocial breakup scales. The full version of the questionnaire included, besides these two scales, demographic information, questions about viewing habits, relationship status and satisfaction, and other items not discussed in this study. The full questionnaire was completed in about 15 min.

The results of the pretest showed that the parasocial relationship items were reliable and consistent with previous research. The parasocial breakup items, which were tested for the first time, also proved generally reliable ($\alpha = .79$), although the variance was rather small ($M = 2.1$, $SD = .56$). Following analyses of the pretest data, one item ("feel vulnerable") was removed from the parasocial breakup scale, because of small variability, and several items were reworded to make the scale more sensitive and to increase variance. These changes increased

variability in the main study, but two more items ("watch other programs" and "keep watching the program anyway") were subsequently found to reduce reliability and were dropped. Thus, the final scale used in this study includes 13 items (see Table 1).

The Adult Sample

The object of the adult sample was to replicate and further validate the findings of the pretest and to test the gender-difference hypothesis. A quota sample of 381 adults was designed, in an attempt to achieve representation across three categories: sex, age (three categories: 25–40, 41–55, 56+), and amount of TV viewing (2 hr or less on weeknights, more than 2 hr). Fifteen students were instructed to find 30 subjects each, equally distributed among all demographic categories, who would be requested to complete questionnaires. Beyond adhering to the quota, students were free to choose whomever they wanted, with the exception of immediate family members. Because students used a variety of methods to locate respondents, the sample consisted of varied groups: Many students used their parents or

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations Parasocial Breakup Scale ($N = 378$)

	Item	Mean	SD
	If my favorite television personality would be taken off the air, I would…		
1	Feel lonely	1.38	.824
2	Watch another program with the same personality	2.65	1.41
3	Become less excited about watching TV	1.69	1.03
4	Watch reruns or taped episodes of the show in which the personality appears	2.14	1.40
5	Feel like I lost a close friend	1.33	0.82
6	Feel sad	1.45	0.86
7	Try to do something to change the situation (e.g., write a letter to the broadcaster)	1.22	0.66
8	Miss my favorite personality	1.89	1.11
9	Find a different personality to like	2.44	1.30
10	Look for information about my favorite personality in other places (e.g., newspapers, Internet etc.)	1.66	1.11
11	Feel disappointed	1.94	1.22
12	Try to meet my favorite personality some other way (e.g., face to face, in movies, shows etc.)	1.46	0.95
13	Feel angry	1.40	0.88
	Total	1.74	0.65

Note.   Means ranged from a low of 1 (*not true at all*) to a high of 5 (*very true*) for each statement.

friends as contacts for entree into places of business and work (including a school, a service office, an industrial plant, and a CPA office) or had their own coworkers complete surveys. Others approached people in shops or went door-to-door in their neighborhood.

The resulting sample included people from various areas of the country, from kibbutz members to city dwellers, from both northern Israel and the central region. Although the variety of subjects reached by the students was wide, they had difficulty in adhering to their quotas, so that the final sample was not equally distributed among the categories. Two hundred and eleven women and 170 men completed questionnaires; 58% of respondents were between 25 and 40 years old, another 28% were between 40 and 55, and an additional 14% were over 55; 61.4% were light viewers and 38.6% were medium or heavy viewers. In sum, although the sample is neither systematic nor random, and thus cannot be assumed to be fully representative of the entire population, it is sizable, quite varied, and represents many subgroups of the Israeli population. Because of the variety of ways in which subjects were recruited, an exact response rate is hard to compute, but students reported good levels of cooperation.

High School Student Sample

To further validate the parasocial breakup scale, a sample of 82 students from a high school in the Haifa area was recruited. This is a large, academically competitive school that serves a socioeconomically diverse population. The questionnaires were distributed through one of the teachers, outside class time and on a fully voluntary basis. Response rate in this sample was 84%. The sample included 47 girls, 29 boys, and 6 respondents who did not report their sex.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Respondents in the main study (381 adults) were asked about their media environment and viewing habits. Consistent with commercial reports, a high degree of media connectivity was found: 82.3% reported being connected to cable television networks and 7.9% to direct satellite television. In terms of viewing time, 61.4% reported watching less than 2 hr on weeknights, 31.5% watched between 2 and 4 hr, and only 7.1% watched more than 4 hr on weeknights; 45.5% generally watched television alone, and 54.5% generally watched with others.

In terms of favorite characters, 63.4% of the respondents chose as their favorite characters hosts of news, current events, or talk shows, and 36.4% chose fictional characters from television series or films. Consistent with earlier research, male subjects predominantly chose male characters (81.7%), but only 47% of the women chose female characters, $\chi^2(1) = 31.57$, $p < 001$. Males (70.9%) were more likely than females (57.8%) to choose real, rather than fictional, characters, $\chi^2(1) = 6.02$, $p < .05$.

Reliability and Validity

In the pretest, adult, and teen samples, the parasocial interaction scale was found acceptably reliable ($\alpha = .77$, $\alpha = .79$, and $\alpha = .80$, respectively). The parasocial breakup scale also proved reliable ($\alpha = .80$, $\alpha = .85$, and $\alpha = .85$, respectively), demonstrating that the items compose a unidimensional scale. The means and standard deviations of the two scales, in both the adult and teen samples, are displayed in Table 2.

A factor analysis was conducted to explore the dimensionality of the parasocial breakup scale. First, a principal components analysis, with no rotation, was conducted. The results indicated a two-factor solution, in which the first factor explains close to 40% of the variance, with an eigenvalue greater than 5, and the second factor adds another 8.8%, with an eigenvalue of 1.1 (see Table 3). Although two items had stronger loadings on the second factor than on the first, the loadings of these items were medium to weak on both factors and therefore did not clearly differentiate the two factors. In order to improve the fit and to examine the Parasocial Relationship scale, an oblique-rotated principal axis factor analysis of the

TABLE 2
Main Findings of Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Parasocial Breakup (PSB)
in Both Samples

	Main Study (N = 378)	High School Sample (N = 82)
Mean PSI	2.83	3.05
Mean PSB	1.74	2.14
Mean PSI men	2.66	2.65
Mean PSI women	2.95	3.28
Mean PSB men	1.72	1.95
Mean PSB women	1.76	2.20
Correlation between	.58	.55
PSI and PSB	Men: .66	Men: .60
	Women: .52	Women: .56

TABLE 3
Parasocial Breakup Item Loadings: Principal Components Analysis

Item	Unrotated Solution		Oblique Rotation	
	Factor 1	Factor 2		
Miss my favorite personality	.766	.156	.742	.439
Feel like I lost a close friend	.734	−.286	.764	.228
Look for information about my favorite personality	.709	.026	.677	.434
Feeling angry	.705	−.120	.708	.271
Loneliness	.677	−.286	.700	.263
Disappointed	.676	.150	.636	.372
Try to meet my favorite personality some other way	.699	.184	.649	.357
Feel sad	.648	−.171	.680	.179
Losing interest in TV	.598	−.305	.623	.206
Watch reruns or taped episodes of the show in which the personality appears	.523	.251	.493	.384
Try to do something to change the situation (e.g., write a letter to the broadcaster)	.475	−.387	.512	.091
Watch another program with the same personality	.501	.530	.357	.659
Find a different personality to like	.395	.522	.344	.320
Eigenvalues (% of variance)	5.169	1.147	7.053	2.141
	(39.765)	(8.826)	(30.666)	(9.309)

parasocial breakup items was performed on the adult sample, following the procedure used by Rubin et al. (1985). Again, two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were identified, but they were highly and negatively correlated (−.680). Additionally, no apparent theoretical explanation was found to differentiate the factors (e.g., items addressing emotions vs. actions, general items vs. specific items). Finally, using structural equation techniques, several confirmatory factor models were examined, to test different one-factor and two-factor models, based on theoretical assumptions (e.g., separating emotions and behaviors, removing all behavioral items). These models explained the data no better than the original model and are therefore not reported in detail. Thus, even though the new scale captures variance that is caused by some systematic and external factor, the vast majority of the systematic variance, and half of the total variance captured by the scale is accounted for by the unidimensional construct of parasocial breakup. The unidentified external factor is also strongly related to breakup.

To examine the construct validity of the parasocial breakup scale, the parasocial breakup and parasocial relationships scores in the three samples were correlated. It was expected that the more intense the parasocial relationship reported by a viewer would be, the more distressed they would be at the thought of losing the relationship. Indeed, the two scales were substantially and positively correlated

($r = .62$ in the pretest; $r = .58$ in the general sample; and $r = .59$ in the high school sample), indicating construct validity. Additional analyses found that the correlation between parasocial relationship and breakup was greater for men ($r = .655$) than for women ($r = .523$) suggesting that for men strong relationship indicates dependency more than for women.

To demonstrate discriminant validity, the 23 items of both the parasocial interaction and breakup scales were subjected to a principal components analysis, with an oblique rotation. The analysis was constrained to a two-factor solution, and the results were expected to differentiate between the items measuring the two different constructs. With the exception of one breakup item ("would look for other program with the same character"), which loaded highly on the parasocial interaction factor, all other items loaded more strongly on the breakup factor than on the interaction factor. In sum, the new scale proved generally reliable and related to parasocial interaction, but it was clearly measuring something distinct.

Hypotheses

To examine the hypotheses, two separate ANOVA models were conducted: the first for parasocial breakup and the second for parasocial interaction. A 2 (men, women) × 2 (teen, adult) ANOVA was conducted, with **parasocial breakup** as a dependent variable. As predicted by H2, a main effect for age was found, $F = 9.665$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$, but, as anticipated in H1, the effect for gender was not significant, $F = 2.198$, $df = 1$, ns. Nor was a significant Age × Gender interaction found, $F = .590$, $df = 1$, ns. A similar 2 (men, women) × 2 (teen, adult) ANOVA of **parasocial interaction** revealed a main effect for gender, $F = 16.358$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$, as predicted in H1, but the main effect for age expected by H2 was not found, $F = 1.842$, $df = 1$, ns, nor was a significant Age × Gender interaction found, $F = 1.329$, $df = 1$, ns.

To explore the differences in parasocial relationships and breakup, resulting from the type of characters chosen (real vs. fictional), two more ANOVA models were tested: the first with parasocial relationship as dependent variable and breakup as a covariate, and the second with breakup as dependent variable and relationship as a covariate. In both, sex and character type were entered as factors. In the model for parasocial breakup, a main effect was found for type of character, $F = 10.710$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$, but not in the model for relationship, $F = 1.474$, $df = 1$, ns. In neither was a Type × Sex interaction found, $F = .758$, $df = 1$, ns, for relationship and $F = .302$, $df = 1$, ns for breakup. Thus, viewers tend to fear breakup from fictional characters more than from real characters, even though viewers' relationships with fictional characters are not stronger than those they develop with real characters.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to introduce a measure of parasocial breakup, a concept that has previously received only anecdotal treatment. It was argued that, if television viewers develop meaningful relationships with their favorite characters, they are likely to be unhappy when these characters are taken off the air. Across three samples, the new scale was found to be reliable and valid. However, respondents' scores did not display the desired variability, and the overall mean scores were well below the midpoint of the scale. Although it is possible that the low scores are a function of social desirability or of the use of a hypothetical method of measurement, future research should examine ways of revising the scale to make it more sensitive.

Gender was the most important predictor of parasocial interaction intensity, but age was found to predict breakup anxiety. This pattern of findings provides an indication that the parasocial interaction and parasocial breakup measures are tapping different constructs. Therefore, despite the substantial association between parasocial relationships and parasocial breakup, the intensity of a relationship is not always a direct indication of the impact of the breakup of such relationship. This study, then, provides construct validity to the concept of parasocial breakup, as measured by the new scale.

Theoretically, this study demonstrates the extent to which theories of relational development are helpful in understanding parasocial relationships. If previous research has shown that the development (Perse & Rubin, 1989) and maintenance of parasocial relationships (e.g., Tsao, 1996) follow patterns similar to those of social relations, this study continues this line of inquiry, to investigate the dissolutions of relationships. Like the breakup of social relationships, the end of parasocial relationships is a painful experience, which elicits symptoms similar to those that follow the loss of a friend.

Future research should explore the relationship of parasocial breakup to different types of characters, among different groups, and across cultures. This study found that the reactions to the loss of a favorite character vary across types of character; future research should explore these differences further. For example, are these differences a result of the genre of the show and the way viewers react to different genres, or of the difference between actor and character that exists in fictional shows, but not in news, talk shows, and other reality programming? Finally, exploring what happens when viewers decide to break off a parasocial relationship would also be interesting (i.e., to stop watching a show)—that is, whether the reasons they lose interest in their parasocial partners are similar to the reasons given for the breakup of social relationships. In sum, it is hoped that the availability of the parasocial breakup measure presented in this study will encourage more research in this area.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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