



Effectiveness of Fictional Characters as Sources of Social Support in Alleviating Loneliness among Adolescents

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Abstract: While technology has bridged physical distances, it has not necessarily reduced emotional isolation. In fact, loneliness, which is defined as the subjective feeling of social disconnection, has increased in many populations, particularly among adolescents, young adults, and the elderly. This study explores the relationship between parasocial interaction (PSI), media consumption, and loneliness among 150 participants. Using standardized self-report tools and non-parametric analyses, the findings revealed moderate levels of PSI, media use, and loneliness. Significant positive correlations were found between PSI and loneliness, media consumption and loneliness, and PSI and media use. A Kruskal-Wallis test showed that participants with high PSI reported significantly greater loneliness than those with lower PSI. No gender differences were found. The results suggest that while PSI and media may offer emotional support, overdependence can heighten feelings of social isolation.

Keywords: *Parasocial interaction, Loneliness, Media consumption, Adolescents*

1. Introduction

Humans are inherently social beings with a fundamental need for connection and belonging. However, the rise of digital media has led to significant changes in how individuals engage socially. This emotional void often drives individuals to seek alternative

forms of social connection, one of which is Parasocial Interaction (PSI). PSI refers to the one-sided, imagined relationships individuals form with media figures, such as celebrities, influencers, or fictional characters. Conceptualized by Horton and Wohl in 1956, PSI occurs when viewers or audiences feel as though they are engaged in a personal, reciprocal relationship with a media personality, despite this interaction being entirely unidirectional. These relationships mimic real-life bonds, providing a sense of intimacy and emotional investment without the risks of rejection or conflict.

With the expansion of digital media, streaming platforms, and social networking sites, opportunities for forming PSIs have multiplied. While these relationships are not based on mutual reciprocity, they offer individuals a sense of companionship, particularly during periods of loneliness or social isolation. Over time, PSI can become emotionally significant, influencing attitudes, behaviors, and even serving as a substitute for real-life social connections. This phenomenon is of growing interest in media psychology, as it sheds light on the role media consumption plays in emotional and psychological well-being. Several mechanisms contribute to PSI formation. Identification, where individuals see aspects of themselves reflected in a media figure, and wishful identification, where individuals aspire to be like the media figure, are key contributors. Additionally, social surrogacy suggests that parasocial relationships can serve as substitutes for real-life connections, providing emotional support and reducing loneliness.

Studies show that PSI can buffer the effects of rejection, enhance emotional well-being, and even provide guidance or inspiration. Fictional characters have a unique psychological impact, often serving as emotional anchors or role models. These parasocial bonds can provide comfort and validation, especially in times of distress or isolation. In recent years, mental health professionals have begun to explore the therapeutic potential of PSI, incorporating fictional characters and narratives into therapeutic practices such as bibliotherapy and cinematherapy. These interventions allow individuals to reflect on characters' struggles or growth, offering a safe space for emotional exploration.

Loneliness itself is a complex, multidimensional experience, distinct from social isolation. Emotional loneliness arises from the absence of close, intimate relationships, while social loneliness pertains to the lack of a broader social network. Loneliness is linked to a variety of negative outcomes, including depression, anxiety, cognitive decline, and even increased mortality risk. Factors such as urbanization, digital communication replacing face-to-face interaction, and societal pressures contribute to this growing public health concern.

Particularly vulnerable populations, including young adults, the elderly, and

individuals with mental health conditions, may struggle with chronic loneliness. In response, some individuals may turn to parasocial relationships as a coping mechanism, finding comfort, belonging, and emotional support in the absence of satisfying real-life connections. While PSI cannot fully replace human interaction, it can serve as a meaningful psychological substitute, offering the emotional connection that some individuals may lack in their daily lives.

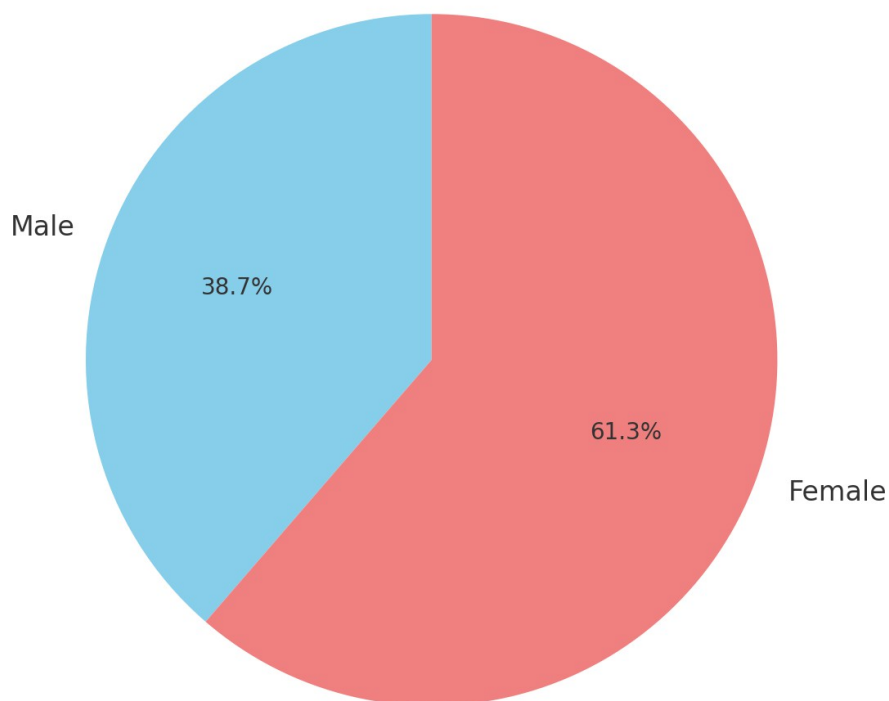
This correlational study examined the relationship between the variables of parasocial interaction and loneliness among 150 adolescents (12- 40 years of age). Socio-demographic data sheet was used to elicit background information and the personal profile of the participants. The Media Consumption Screening Questionnaire is a 10-item self-report measure developed to assess participants' general media usage patterns and engagement with media figures. The questionnaire covers dimensions such as frequency of media use, emotional investment in media content, preference for specific platforms or characters, and the purpose of media engagement (e.g., relaxation, companionship, escapism). The UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) is a widely used 20-item self-report instrument developed by Russell (1996) to assess subjective feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

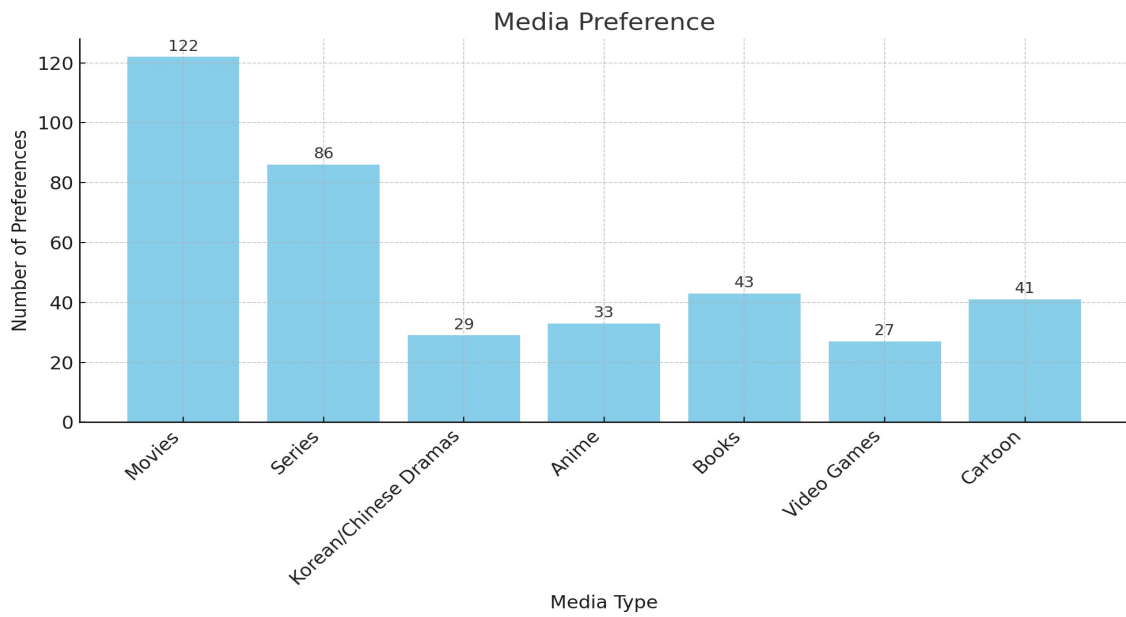
Items reflect both the absence of social connection and dissatisfaction with the quality of existing relationships. The total score ranges from 20 to 80, with higher scores indicating greater perceived loneliness. The Parasocial Interaction Scale is a self-report questionnaire designed to measure the extent of individuals' one-sided emotional and cognitive involvement with media figures, such as TV characters, celebrities, or online influencers. The scale includes items that assess feelings of closeness, perceived friendship, and emotional investment in these media figures. The tool demonstrates good reliability and validity across diverse populations and media contexts.

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the central tendency and dispersion of key variables, including media consumption, parasocial interaction (PSI), and loneliness scores. A correlation matrix using Spearman's rho was employed to examine the relationship between parasocial interaction and loneliness, as the data did not meet normality assumptions. To assess group differences, Kruskal-Wallis H tests were conducted to examine differences in loneliness scores across participants grouped by levels of parasocial interaction (e.g., low, moderate, high), based on PSI score tertiles and to explore differences in loneliness based on gender, given the non-parametric nature of the data.

Table 1: *Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants*

Sample Characteristics	Frequency <i>n</i> = (150)	Percentage %	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender				
Male	58	38.6		
Female	92	61.33		
Age				
12 - 18	3	41.2		
19 - 25	136	29.4		
26- 40	11	29.4		
Media preference				
Movies	122	81.3		
Series	86	57.3		
K/C Drama	29	19.3		
Anime	33	22		
Books	43	28.7		
Video games	27	18		
Cartoon	41	27.3		

Gender Distribution (N = 150)**Figure 1:** *Depicting the gender distribution of the sample*

**Figure 2:** Showing the media preference of sample**Table 2:** Descriptives

	UCLA	PSI	MEDIA CONSUMPTION
N	150	150	150
Median	27.0	62.0	18.0
Mode	30.0	60.0	20.0
Standard deviation	14.1	16.5	7.15
Range	60	78	40
Minimum	0	20	0
Maximum	60	98	40
Shapiro-Wilk W	0.976	0.969	0.984
Shapiro-Wilk p	0.010	0.002	0.088

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

		UCLA	PSI	Media Consumption
UCLA	Spearman's rho	—		
	df	—		
	p-value	—		
PSI	Spearman's rho	0.295	—	
	df	148	—	
	p-value	<.001	—	

Media Consumption	Spearman's rho	0.294	0.581	—
	df	148	148	—
	p-value	<.001	<.001	—

Table 4: *Kruskal wallis for PSI group*

	χ^2	df	p	ϵ^2
UCLA	12.1	2	0.002	0.081

Table 5: *Pairwise comparisons - UCLA*

		W	P
Moderate	High	2.02	0.328
Moderate	Low	-3.82	0.019
High	Low	-4.95	0.001

Table 6: *Kruskal wallis for gender differences*

	χ^2	df	p	ϵ^2
Media Consumption	0.239	1	0.625	0.00160
Loneliness	1.083	1	0.298	0.00727
PSI	0.686	1	0.408	0.00460

Table 7: *Pairwise comparisons MEDIA CONSUMPTION*

		W	p
Female	Male	0.691	0.625

Pairwise comparisons - Loneliness

		W	p
Female	Male	1.47	0.298

Pairwise comparisons - PSI

		W	p
Female	Male	1.17	0.408

2. Discussion

The present study explored the relationship between parasocial interaction (PSI), loneliness, and media consumption among 150 participants. Descriptive statistics indicated that participants experienced moderate levels of loneliness ($M = 24.7$, $SD = 14.1$), with a symmetrical distribution, suggesting a wide range of experiences. PSI scores also averaged at a moderate level ($M = 61.7$, $SD = 16.5$), though the negative skew indicated that a smaller group reported higher emotional engagement with media figures. Media consumption was similarly moderate ($M = 17.8$, $SD = 7.15$) with a slight tendency toward higher usage.

Correlation analyses revealed a moderate positive relationship between loneliness and PSI ($\rho = 0.295$, $p < .001$), suggesting that individuals experiencing greater loneliness may turn to media figures for emotional comfort. Loneliness also showed a similar correlation with media consumption ($\rho = 0.294$, $p < .001$), indicating media may serve as a coping strategy for social disconnection. A strong positive correlation between PSI and media consumption ($\rho = 0.581$, $p < .001$) supported the idea that frequent media use fosters deeper parasocial involvement.

Group differences based on PSI levels were statistically significant; individuals with high PSI reported higher loneliness than those with moderate or low PSI ($\chi^2 = 12.1$, $p = 0.002$), highlighting that while parasocial bonds may offer temporary solace, they might not fulfill the deeper needs of social reciprocity. Interestingly, no significant gender differences were found in loneliness, PSI, or media consumption, contrary to prior findings, possibly reflecting evolving media habits across genders. Overall, the results underscore the complex interplay between emotional well-being and digital engagement, emphasizing the dual role of media as both a support system and a potential amplifier of loneliness when relied upon heavily in place of real-life relationships.

To conclude, this study highlighted the significant role of parasocial interaction and media consumption in shaping loneliness. While parasocial interactions provide a source of emotional connection for individuals who may feel isolated, they can also intensify loneliness when these one-sided relationships are over-relied upon. The findings suggest that while media consumption and PSI might serve as coping mechanisms for loneliness, they do not fully replace real-world social relationships and, in some cases, may even exacerbate feelings

of isolation. Moreover, the lack of gender differences in the relationships between PSI, loneliness, and media consumption is an important and novel finding, which warrants further investigation. Despite the strength of the study's design and findings, future research should explore the longitudinal impacts of parasocial interactions on loneliness and consider different types of media and their specific effects on emotional well-being. Additionally, the study could benefit from incorporating more diverse samples, including individuals from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these variables interact in varied contexts. Overall, the study contributes to the growing understanding of the psychological implications of media engagement, emphasizing the need for balanced media consumption and the promotion of authentic social connections to combat loneliness in the digital age.

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