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Alone yet Attached: Impact of Loneliness on Parasocial Interaction among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to discern the impact of loneliness on parasocial interaction (PSI) among young adults aged between 18 and 26 years. A correlational research design was adopted, and a non-probability purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 150 participants. Data was collected using the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) developed by Russell and Colleagues (1980) and derived from earlier parasocial scales by Rubin et al. (1985), Cole and Leets (1999), and Auter & Palmgreen (2000), the Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale (CPPI). The results revealed a significant positive relationship between the independent variable (loneliness) and the dependent variable (parasocial interaction) ($r = .483$, $p < .01$). A simple linear regression analysis was performed, and the results indicated that loneliness was a significant positive predictor of parasocial interaction ($B = 0.67$, $t(148) = 6.71$, $p < .001$). The regression model explained 23.3% of the variance in parasocial interaction ($R2 = .233$, $F(1,148) = 44.98$, $P < .001$). It implies that young people tend to seek one-sided, mediated communication to satisfy their social needs. However, since this study utilized a cross-sectional research design, the causal inferences cannot be made. It is recommended that future studies explore this phenomenon

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using a longitudinal study design.

Introduction

Nowadays, people may often lean into the arena of forming meaningful connection with the people that portray a certain persona on television or any other source of media because of the relatability levels rather than seeking in-real life connections with the people outside the phone or television for that matter. One of the many reasons that could lead to this could be loneliness. Loneliness is defined as the subjective, unpleasant psychological experience of feeling disconnected, isolated, or lacking desired quantity and quality in one's social relationships. (Russell ,1996). When individuals experience a lack of meaningful interpersonal connections, they may seek alternative sources of companionship and emotional connection. One such form of mediated connection can be understood through, Parasocial interaction (PSI) refers to a kind of psychological relationship experienced by an audience in their mediated encounters with performers in mass media. PSI is described as an illusory experience, such that media audiences interact with personas (e.g. talk show hosts, celebrities, fictional characters, social media influencer) as if they are engaged in a reciprocal relationship with them, (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Loneliness may encourage people to seek emotional connection through forming meaningful relationship with their favourite celebrity, fictional characters influences and thus seek comfort within them though its mostly on temporary basis, and overdependence on Parasocial Relationship leads to less desirability to build connection.

Previous researches have examined loneliness in relation to parasocial relationship, providing a basis for understanding how loneliness may be associated with PSI. Rus et.al (2026) examined that although parasocial relationships are increasingly relevant in the digital media environment, the psychological mechanisms linking loneliness to parasocial involvement remain insufficiently understood, particularly the roles of parasocial attachment and attitudes toward celebrities. In addition, Decky (2025) examined that although parasocial relationships (PSRs) have become increasingly common through social media, there is limited understanding of the factors that contribute to their development, particularly the roles of loneliness, interpersonal functioning, and social media engagement. Furthermore, Wang et.al (2008) studied that loneliness is met by mediated communication, specifically through parasocial interaction. Emotional (family and romantic), social, chronic, situational, and transient loneliness are differentiated. Different types of loneliness are expected to predict different uses of parasocial interaction, with gender serving as a moderator of these effects.

Despite growing research on parasocial interaction (PSI) and loneliness, several gaps remain like researches that have been conducted in the past mostly were influenced by western cultures only. Previous studies have often focused on relatively narrow samples of young adults, such as university students rather on different genders, socio-economic backgrounds and geographic regions. Recent studies repeatedly note that these two variables do occur together through third variables such as social comparison, attachment styles or the platforms that we use to interact with the celebrity / persona. This study can help us better understand how loneliness may shape young adult's connections with media personalities. The findings may help psychologists recognise that for some people, PSI is a way to cope with loneliness. It may also guide future research and interventions focused on young adults' social and emotional well-being.

Methodology

This study aims to assess the impact of Loneliness on Parasocial Interaction among young adults.

Sample

Sample size of 150 young adults taken to conduct this research between the age of 18-26 years and the sampling technique used was non-probability purposive sampling.

Inclusion Criteria. Young adults between the ages of 18-26 years were included; basic English proficiency was required.

Exclusion Criteria. Individuals who do not meet the age criteria or are unable to comprehend the test for reasons like neurological disorders or inability to understand English are excluded from the study.

Instruments

Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale Derived from earlier parasocial scales by Rubin et al. (1985), Cole and Leets (1999), and Auter & Palmgreen (2000), the Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale (CPPI) is a 20-item, 5-point Likert scale designed to measure parasocial relationships with celebrities beyond television. The scale demonstrates strong reliability of 0.80 to 0.90. It achieves satisfactory construct validity, supported by factor analyses and shows strong predictive validity through consistent relationships with media exposure and celebrity identification.

UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) Developed by Russell and Colleagues (1980), the revised UCLA Scale consists of 20 items which has 10 negatively worded questions and 10 positively worded questions (which are reverse scored questions). This scale demonstrates a good reliability; which has high

internal consistency (0.84-0.94) plus it has strong 1 year retest reliability. It has a strong validity as it measures distinct validity measures of personality, social desirability and depression while it co-relates its predictability with other loneliness facets, interpersonal relationships and overall psychological well-being.

Research Design

This study uses a co-relational research design to study the Impact of Loneliness on Parasocial Interaction among young adults.

Procedure

This study aims to assess the impact of Loneliness on Parasocial Interaction among young adults 18-26. It was conducted using the survey methods such as Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale and UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3). Shortly afterwards we started finding the participants for the research who filled the criteria above, following it we took the consent from our participants along with briefing them with our purpose. Their confidentiality was ensured and they were given a free will to opt out of the study at any moment without felling the pressure. Thereafter taking their consent; they were asked to fill the Google Form and answer the questions as honestly, they can. Our participants were being thanked for their sincere participation, for taking out their precious time and for the co-operation during the research.

Statistical Analysis

Inferential Statistics was carried out for this study. The data analysis was done by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 29.0).

Results

Table 1 Regression Analysis

Variables	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	17.60	6.53	-	2.70	.008
Loneliness	0.67	0.10	.48	6.71	<.001
R Square	.233				
F	44.98**				

*Note N= 150, **p=.001*

A simple linear regression was used to see if loneliness could predict celebrity levels. The result revealed that the overall model was statistically significant F(1 148) = 44.98, p <.001. The model explained 23.3% of the variation in celebrity levels (R^2 =.233 Adjusted R^2 =.228). Loneliness was a positive predictor of celebrity levels with a coefficient of B = 0.67. The t-test confirmed this t (148) = 6.71, p <.001 meaning that higher loneliness is linked to celebrity scores.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to understand how loneliness affects parasocial interaction (PSI) among young adults. The study included 150 participants. The results showed a strong positive relationship between loneliness and parasocial interaction. This means that people who feel lonelier are more likely to develop strong emotional connections or attachments to celebrities. Loneliness significantly predicted parasocial interaction and explained 23.3% of the differences in PSI scores. Overall, the findings suggest that loneliness may play an important role in developing strong attachments to celebrities.

This finding can be understood from a social connection perspective, which suggests that people who experience loneliness or a lack of belonging may turn to one-sided connections with celebrities to compensate for limited social interaction (McCutcheon et al., 2021). When people experience ongoing social isolation, celebrities may provide a safe and comfortable source of emotional connection. Unlike real-life relationships, which require mutual effort, communication, trust, and involve the possibility of rejection, connections with celebrities allow fans to feel emotionally close to someone without the challenges of direct social interaction (Zsila et al., 2021, 2024).

However, an important limitation of this study should be considered. Since the study used a cross-sectional regression design, it cannot show a cause-and-effect relationship between loneliness and parasocial interaction. Although the results show a significant relationship between the two variables, they cannot tell us whether loneliness leads people to develop stronger attachments to celebrities or whether strong celebrity attachments contribute to greater loneliness. Some research suggests that relying heavily on one-sided relationships with celebrities may reduce involvement in real-life social relationships (Zsila et al., 2021). This means that loneliness and parasocial interaction may influence each other over time. Future research should use longitudinal studies to examine how loneliness and parasocial interaction change over time and to better understand the direction of their relationship.

The findings of this study have several important implications. The results showed that loneliness significantly predicted parasocial interaction and explained 23.3% of the variance in celebrity worship. This suggests that feelings of loneliness may be an important factor associated with stronger emotional attachments to celebrities. These findings add to the existing understanding of how social and emotional factors may be related to parasocial interaction (McCutcheon et al., 2021; Zsila et al., 2024)

From a counselling perspective, the findings suggest that professionals may consider exploring feelings of loneliness and the quality of the real-life social relationships of the people they are working with. Supporting individuals in developing meaningful social connections and strengthening their offline support systems may be useful when loneliness is a concern. The findings may also have implications for media and digital well-being. Since social media and digital platforms make it easier for people to regularly engage with celebrities, promoting healthy media use and awareness of parasocial relationships may help individuals understand the difference between one-sided media connections and reciprocal real-life relationships.

Conclusion

The present study examined the impact of loneliness on parasocial interaction among young adults. The findings showed a significant positive relationship between loneliness and parasocial interaction, with loneliness explaining 23.3% of the variance in PSI scores. This suggests that young adults experiencing higher levels of loneliness may be more likely to develop stronger attachments to celebrities. However, since the study used a cross-sectional design, it cannot establish a cause-and-effect relationship. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of understanding loneliness when examining parasocial relationships among young adults.

Future research should use longitudinal studies to examine how loneliness and parasocial interaction change over time and whether they influence each other. It could also explore other factors, such as social support, self-esteem, and real-life relationships, to better understand parasocial interaction.

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