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# **Parasocial break-up from favorite television characters: The role of attachment styles and relationship intensity**

**Jonathan Cohen**

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the responses of television viewers to the potential loss of their favorite television characters. A sample of 381 Israeli adults completed questionnaires, including questions about their relationships with their favorite characters, how they would react if those characters were taken off the air, and their attachment styles. Results showed that viewers expecting to lose their favorite characters anticipate negative reactions similar to those experienced after the dissolution of social relationships. These reactions were related both to the intensity of the parasocial relationship with the favorite character and to the viewers' attachment style. Anxious-ambivalently attached respondents anticipated the most negative responses. The results are discussed in light of their contribution to attachment research and as evidence of the similarity between parasocial relationships and close social relationships.

KEY WORDS: media effects • parasocial interaction • relationship break-ups

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The psychology of imaginary relationships is a topic only recently explored by students of human communication and interaction (Caughey, 1984; Giles, 2000). Rather than limiting their investigation to notions of idolization and imitation, researchers have come to adopt a more interactive perspective, studying imaginary relationships as they study other types of social relationships (e.g., R. Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Television viewers

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are considered to be engaged in relationships with media stars in which their own psychological states are activated and in which they are active, rather than passive, partners. Confirming this perspective, studies have recently found that the same attachment beliefs and behaviors guiding close relationships also play a role in shaping viewers' feelings toward media stars and in predicting the intensity of their relationships with them.

Cohen (1997) and then Cole and Leets (1999) found that adult attachment models apply to TV viewers' parasocial relationships and that the intensity of such relationships can be predicted by viewers' attachment styles. The basis for both studies was an argument that attachment theory explains more than just patterns in child development. Rather, attachment can be used to explain adult romantic relationships, attitudes toward work (Hazan & Shaver, 1990), and even religious beliefs (Kirkpatrick, 1994). Thus, it was argued, attachment styles should also impact other relational activities, such as imaginary relationships with favorite television characters.

The present study was designed to replicate findings of an association between attachment and parasocial interaction in order to resolve earlier discrepancies in findings. More importantly, this study significantly extends our understanding of how attachment models shape imaginary relationships by examining how people react to the thought of the break-up of such relationships. The notion that attachment models not only shape close relationships, but also provide a general orientation toward human relationships is tested with the purpose of extending the explanatory boundaries of attachment theory to include imaginary relationships. If imaginary relationships with television characters are influenced by the fundamental psychological mechanisms that shape social relationships, this indicates that such relationships have the ability to activate attachment thoughts and feelings and, possibly, to fulfill some attachment needs. Specifically, this study was designed to establish whether television viewers with different attachment styles react differently to the expected loss of a favorite TV character.

### **Adult attachment**

Early attachment experiences with caregivers shape an infant's expectations about close relationships later in life (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Infants who receive consistent care learn to expect that their needs will be met. If the care provided to the infant is not sufficiently warm and loving, then the infant will learn to expect disappointment from relating to others. If the care is inconsistent, sometimes loving and at other times rejecting or lacking, then the infant learns that love is not readily available and becomes preoccupied with receiving positive responses. These expectations develop later in childhood into structured mental models that consist of beliefs about how one should behave toward significant others and expectations of how one should be treated by them (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). These mental models have been found to consist of three main elements: comfort with intimacy, ability to depend on significant others, and ability to trust in their faithfulness and love (Collins & Read, 1990).

Given that mental models of attachment direct behaviors toward others, they influence our interactions and relationships with them, and at the same time govern interpretations and attributions of their responses. Through these attributions and interpretations, later experiences tend to reinforce early beliefs and make attachment styles relatively stable. However, if consistent discrepancies arise between attachment beliefs and relational experiences, then mental models of attachment may slowly begin to change (Feeney & Noller, 1992). Whereas attachment styles are relatively stable, attachment figures change throughout the life cycle: from parents during childhood, to friends during adolescence, and to romantic partners in adulthood. Attachment styles primarily shape our most intimate relationships, but they have a more general effect on other close relationships as well (Creasy, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999).

Mental models of attachment have been described and classified differently by various scholars, but the most basic typology defines three types of adult attachment styles (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). People with secure attachment styles tend to feel secure in their relationships, have positive beliefs about relationships, and find it easy to get close to and depend on others. Those with avoidant attachment styles tend to hold pessimistic beliefs about relationships, distrust others, and avoid intimacy and relationships. Finally, anxiously attached individuals tend to strongly desire and seek romance, intimacy, and relationships, yet distrust their partners and become overly suspicious, dependent, and 'clingy.'

One of the most central components of attachment theory explains differences in reaction to separation and loss of attachment figures. Indeed, both the theoretical roots (Bowlby, 1973) of attachment theory and its initial empirical support (Ainsworth, Belhar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) were based on observations of differences in how infants respond to separation and loss from their caregivers. Children with secure attachments were found to trust their caregivers enough to gradually move away in order to play and explore, whereas infants with anxious attachments tended to cling to their caregivers. Avoidant children feigned disinterest in their caregivers but also showed little interest in exploration.

Recent research has demonstrated that adults, too, respond to separation from romantic relationships in ways that are consistent with attachment experiences and expectations. Whereas secure individuals tend to recover more quickly, avoidant adults have somewhat more difficulty in coping with loss, and anxious ambivalent adults respond most negatively and intensely to separation. Feeney and Noller (1992) found that anxious-ambivalent participants were most surprised and upset following break-up, while avoidant participants showed the most relief and least negative emotions. Secure participants reported medium levels of emotional response to break-up.

Attachment relationships differ from other adult relationships in the functions they serve for psychological well-being. While adults are not as dependent on attachment figures as infants (Weiss, 1986), such adult relationships add a component of security and intimacy that other

relationships often lack. Because attachment relationships provide closeness and security, their dissolution is likely to be accompanied by distress. Bowlby described the stages of loss for infants as including shock, searching, disorganization, despair, and finally reorientation. Although adults are less dependent on their attachment figures, the loss of an attachment relationship is still followed by denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Bakermans-Kranenburg & Van IJzendoorn, 1997). Individual differences in attachment styles are linked to differences in the length and intensity of each stage. The lack of availability, or even the threat of separation from an attachment figure, leads adults to behaviors such as: '... searching, clinging, crying, protesting, anger, and approaching ...' (Pistole, 1994, p. 148). When examining overall distress following a break-up, research has found that like infants, anxious adults are most distressed after the break-up of close romantic relationships (Barbara & Dion, 2000; Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998).

In adults, attachment security may be maintained through more subtle and symbolic means than those used by children in attaching to their primary caregivers (Pistole, 1994). It stands to reason, then, that at least some attachment needs of adults may be satisfied through symbolic relationships with media figures. Likewise, though the relationships with media figures may be less intimate than those with physical attachment figures, a separation from them may trigger similarly negative responses.

The break-up of close relationships often leads to depression and is a common reason for seeking psychological counseling (McCarthy, Lambert, & Brack, 1997), but such reactions differ widely among individuals (Sprecher, 1994). Mearns (1991) found that the stronger the love toward a partner and the more the partner was seen as attractive, the stronger was the post-break-up depression. Length of relationship and closeness are positive predictors of intensity and duration of distress after break-up, whereas distress is negatively related to the perceived ease of finding an alternative partner (Simpson, 1987).

The response to the break-up of close relationships includes both emotional and behavioral elements. Although individual responses to dissolution of close relationships differ, they may include anger, sadness, regret, rejection, anxiety, jealousy, loneliness, and resentment (Barbara & Dion, 2000). Depending on both individual personality traits (e.g., attachment styles, self-esteem) and contextual features (e.g., who initiated the break-up, what are the perceived opportunities for alternative partners), individuals may respond by focusing on negative emotions, trying to cling to the former partner, or searching for more positive and constructive methods of coping with the break-up (e.g., turning attention to other aspects of life or seeking other partners).

The loss of imaginary relationships has not received much empirical attention. Meyrowitz (1994) examined the social reaction to the death of celebrities, such as Elvis, John Lennon, and others. The myths, rituals, and pilgrimages surrounding the death of these media stars provide anecdotal evidence of their importance to the lives of their fans and the difficulties

associated with their death. Though emotions and memories may linger, perhaps aided by photos, records, or movies, the death of a beloved media star – like that of a close friend – is a sad occasion. Meyrowitz (1994) concludes that despite the unique nature of relationships between media stars and their fans ‘... these relationships have features that are very human, very warm, and very caring’ (p. 80).

Given the importance of attachment relations and the possibility of symbolic relationships serving attachment needs, it is not difficult to explain either the intensity of imaginary relationships or the distress caused by their dissolution. The nature of symbolic relationships is not identical to that of social relationships in that symbolic relationships are with a character playing a role rather than with the person as such. When this character is taken off the air, the relationship with the actor may continue but the character is gone. While symbolic relationships and their break-up are, therefore, different than relationships with celebrities, a critical mass of research evidence exists for arguing that they are not nearly as different as they may seem. If imaginary relationships with television characters fulfill attachment needs, then their break-up is likely to cause distress, especially among those viewers most vulnerable to separation anxiety.

### **Parasocial interaction as social relationships**

The application of an attachment perspective to the study of parasocial relationships is based not only on the findings that attachment styles impact a variety of relational phenomena, but also from a redirection of the study of parasocial relationships. If parasocial relationships were once seen as low-grade nonreal relationships, or as a poor substitute for the lonely, elderly, and disabled, in recent years they have been conceptualized as a more respectable form of relationship. Parasocial relationships were initially defined as ‘intimacy at a distance’ and pseudo-friendship with a media persona in the form of a special and personal connection (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

In order to draw viewers and keep them loyal, it was argued, television characters (both real and fictional) offer their viewers an opportunity to do more than simply watch; they offer simulated interaction. Using a variety of media production techniques, both within the shows and in auxiliary appearances on talk shows, award shows, interviews, magazines, and newspaper gossip columns, characters try to give fans the feeling that they ‘really’ know them in the sense of knowing more about them than is revealed by the script of any particular show. Indicators of such relationships are similar to attributes of personal relationships: feeling sorry for the characters when they make a mistake, missing them when they are gone, looking forward to seeing them, wishing to meet them in person, and seeking information about them (A. Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). Parasocial relationships were initially conceived as a substitute for ‘real’ social relationships, used mainly by those who needed to compensate for the lack of opportunities for social contact.

Studies seeking to confirm this view failed to find evidence for any

positive relationship between loneliness and parasocial relationships (A. Rubin et al., 1985), nor were social compensation motives for television viewing related to lack of social support or to increased social isolation (Finn & Gorr, 1988). However, studies comparing parasocial relationships with other types of social relationships, and viewing them as an extension of strong social relationships, have been more fruitful. Tsao (1996) found that parasocial relationships were positively related to personality attributes that predict sociability, such as cognitive and affective empathy and extraversion, but were unrelated to indicators of social deficiencies. In a similar vein, Turner (1993) found that negative self-esteem was not generally related to parasocial relationships, and that positive self-esteem was related to parasocial relationships with comedians. Whereas these findings may seem counter-intuitive (why would someone with the possibility for real social interaction bother with parasocial interaction?), they suggest that social and parasocial interaction are complementary, perhaps because they require similar social skills. Thus, those who have difficulties with social relationships because they lack either the ability to relate to the feelings of others or are extremely shy also have trouble developing relationships with television characters.

As in personal relationships, the longer the viewer has been involved in a parasocial relationship with a character, the higher the level of confidence in the attribution of the character's behavior (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Moreover, the stronger the parasocial relationship, the greater the importance attached to the relationship (R. Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Perse and Rubin (1989) also found that similar personal constructs are used in both social and parasocial relationships. Most recently, Boon and Lomore (2001) found that, as in romantic attraction, attraction to a celebrity predicted the strength of the investment in the relationship, which in turn predicted the perceived intimacy in the relationship. Thus, as attachment has become the leading theoretical framework for the study of close adult relationships, its application to the study of parasocial relationships provides an opportunity to extend our knowledge of both social and parasocial relationships.

### **Attachment and parasocial relationships**

Cohen (1997) found limited support for the compensatory model by identifying an association between insecure (anxious and avoidant) attachment models and strong parasocial relationships, but only for dating males, whereas for dating females strong parasocial relationships were associated with secure attachments. However, because he did not differentiate between anxious-ambivalents and avoidants, it is hard to use his findings to support or reject the compensatory model. In contrast, Cole and Leets' (1999) findings were more clear-cut, showing that for both men and women anxious-ambivalent participants had the strongest parasocial relationships and avoidant participants the weakest.

The differences between the findings of the two studies point to the need for further examination of this association but may be explained by the different methods of measuring attachment. Cole and Leets (1999) used

self-classification, whereas Cohen (1997) used the AAS, and the grouping of both kinds of insecure attachments together. In an extension of this argument, if attachment styles and mental models of attachment shape parasocial relationships, then they should also influence how viewers react to the possibility that their favorite character might become unavailable to them.

*H1:* A positive association will be found between parasocial relationships and the intensity of expected distress following the loss of a relationship with a favorite media character.

Following the findings of Cole and Leets (1999), and in accordance with the complementarity hypothesis (Tsao, 1996), an association is expected among attachment models, parasocial relationships, and break-up.

*H2:* Anxiously attached adults will have the most intense parasocial relationships, followed by secure adults. Avoidantly attached adults are expected to have the lowest levels of parasocial relationships as compared to secure and anxiously attached adults.

*H3:* Anxiously attached adults will expect to be most distressed upon parasocial break-up, followed by secure adults, and then by avoidantly attached adults who will expect to be least distressed following parasocial break-up.

## Method

### Sampling and procedure

A quota sample of 381 Jewish Israeli adults was designed to include respondents across three categories: both men and women, participants in three age categories (25–40 years, 41–55 years, 55+ years), and both light and heavy TV viewers (two hours or less on weeknights, more than two hours). Fifteen research students were each instructed to find 30 participants, equally distributed among the above demographic categories, who would be willing to complete questionnaires. Beyond adhering to the quota, students were free to choose whomever they wanted with the exception of immediate family members. Students then provided a short description of those they sampled. Owing to their use of different methods of recruiting respondents, the sample was varied. Many students used their parents or friends as contacts in various workplaces (including teachers, service workers, factory workers, and office staff), or had their own co-workers complete surveys. Others approached people in shops or went door-to-door in their neighborhood.

The sample includes both Kibbutz members and city dwellers, from northern Israel and the central region of the country. Although the students did find a wide range of participants, they had difficulty in adhering to their quotas. Therefore, the final sample represented all age, sex, and viewing categories, but not equally: 211 women and 170 men; 58% were under 40 years old, 28% were between 40–55 years old, and 14% were over 55 years old; 61.4% were light viewers and 38.6% were medium or heavy viewers. In terms of specific viewing habits: 61.4% reported watching less than two hours on weeknights, 31.5% watched between two and four hours, and only 7.1% watched more than four



hours on weeknights; 45.5% generally watched television alone, and 54.5% watched with others. Respondents were also asked about their media environment and a high degree of media connectivity was found with 82.3% having cable services, and 7.9% connections to direct satellite television. Married respondents made up 53.3% of the sample, 41.7% were single, and the rest were divorced or widowed. Approximately 81% of the participants were born in Israel, 5% in Africa or Asia, and the rest in Europe or America.

Although the sample is neither systematic nor random, and thus not representative of the entire population, it is sizable, quite varied, and represents many sub-groups of the Israeli population. Because of the variety of ways in which participants were recruited, it is hard to compute an exact response rate, but students reported moderate to high levels of cooperation. The questionnaire was administered in Hebrew and was based on previously used translations, with the exception of the measure of parasocial break-up (see later), which was developed in Hebrew. The questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes to complete and respondents returned the questionnaire to the students upon completion.

### **Measures**

Three variables were measured by the questionnaire: attachment style, parasocial relationships, and parasocial break-up.

**Attachment styles.** Individual differences in attachment were measured using the forced choice method first employed by Hazan and Shaver (1987). This measure instructs the respondent to choose one of three short paragraphs that best describes his or her own attachment style. The three paragraphs describe typical feelings characterizing three attachment styles: secure attachment, anxious-ambivalent attachment, and avoidant attachment. Securely attached individuals are comfortable with intimacy and interdependence, and trust their partners; anxious-avoidant individuals are characterized by a desire for greater intimacy and dependence than desired by one's partner and less trust in the future of the relationship; avoidant individuals tend to avoid intimacy and interdependence, and have problems with trusting others. Cole and Leets (1999) established criterion validity for this method by showing that groups of participants choosing each of the paragraphs differ in theoretically consistent ways on the attachment dimensions measured by another scale (Collins & Read, 1990).

**Parasocial relationships.** Because people become attached to specific television characters, the parasocial interaction and break-up scales were completed in reference to a character named by each respondent as his or her favorite character. Respondents were asked to pick a character from any TV show, thereby including fictitious characters, hosts, newscasters, or other types of TV personalities. Though symbolic relationships may exist with characters from film, comics, or other media, the restriction to TV characters is based on the argument that each medium creates a different type of relationship. For example, film is thought to provide a more powerful experience, whereas TV makes up for its interrupted viewing with recurring viewings (Houston, 1984). Thus, including other types of media characters was thought to conceptually complicate the study.

They were then asked to respond to 10 five-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). These statements were taken from

the short version of the parasocial interaction scale developed by A. Rubin et al. (1985), as used by Perse and Rubin (1989). Items described behaviors and feelings toward a TV persona, such as 'My favorite character makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.'

**Parasocial break-up.** After completing the parasocial interaction scale, respondents were asked to imagine their response if 'your favorite character were to be taken off the air,' in other words to imagine their response to the loss of their favorite character, and were then presented with a series of statements that made up the parasocial break-up scale. Thus, the parasocial break-up scale was completed in a hypothetical context, with respondents asked to think about how they would feel and what they would do if they lost their favorite parasocial relationship. This method was considered most appropriate because it allowed each respondent to react to a separation from a character who was currently their favorite without having to rely on what were possibly distant memories.

Based on previous research establishing the similarity of parasocial relationships to close social relationships, the expected break-up distress measure was developed to resemble measures of romantic break-up. However, despite the fact that this measure was based on interpersonal break-up research, parasocial break-up is clearly not identical to romantic break-ups. Therefore, the items used by Barbara and Dion (2000) were modified. Eight items addressed post-break-up feelings. The items were as follows: If my favorite character were to go off the air I would: (1) feel lonely, (2) feel vulnerable, (3) become less excited about TV, (4) feel like I lost a close friend, (5) feel sad, (6) miss the character, (7) be disappointed, and (8) be angry. Eight others addressed post break-up behaviors (If my favorite character were to go 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 interact with the character in another way, keep watching the program anyway). The items were five-point Likert-type items, with response options ranging from 1 = *not true at all* to 5 = *very true*. After pre-testing the new measure, three items were removed (watch other programs, vulnerable, keep watching the program anyway). This scale was constructed as part of a larger project that was meant to develop the new scale, and test its reliability and validity (Cohen, 2003). Reliability was tested in two additional samples, and across samples the scale was found to be internally consistent and reliable ( $\alpha = .85$ ). The association of this scale in theoretically consistent ways with other constructs, such as sex and age (i.e., no sex differences, more expected distress for teenagers), as well as its association with parasocial interaction ( $r = .58$ ), also provides evidence of construct validity.

In addition to the parasocial relationships, parasocial expected break-up distress, and attachment measures, the questionnaire included items assessing television-viewing patterns, which were not used in this study. Demographic information was collected including data on age, sex, marital/relationship status, and satisfaction from relationships.

## Results

The distribution of attachment styles within the sample included 77.2% secure, 16.8% avoidant, and 5% anxious-ambivalent. This distribution includes more

secure participants and fewer avoidant and anxious-ambivalent participants than previously found in U.S. samples and undergraduate samples in Israel (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991) and Australia (Feeney & Noller, 1992). However, the present distribution closely resembles that found in a study of army recruits in Israel (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995).

The 10-item parasocial interaction scale proved to be reliable ( $\alpha = .79$ ). The parasocial interaction scores were distributed with a mean for the entire sample of 2.97, and an  $SD$  of 0.85. As found in previous studies (Cohen, 1997; Tsao, 1996), women reported significantly stronger parasocial relationships than men ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = .82$  for women, and  $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = .86$  for men;  $t(377) = -3.55$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The newly constructed parasocial expected break-up distress scale consisted of 13 items and proved to be reliable ( $\alpha = .85$ ). The scores on this scale were distributed with a lower mean and less variability ( $M = 1.88$ , and  $SD = .65$ ), than the parasocial interaction scale. Consistent with earlier findings suggesting that women do not become more distressed than men following romantic break-ups (Helgeson, 1994; Simpson, 1987; Sprecher, 1994), no significant sex difference was found in parasocial break-up scores ( $M = 1.92$ ,  $SD = .63$  for women, and  $M = 1.84$ ,  $SD = .68$  for men). Another indicator of construct validity was that, as expected, hours of viewing was found to positively correlate with both interaction ( $r = .150$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and break-up ( $r = .153$ ,  $p < .01$ ). That is, heavy viewers had stronger parasocial interactions and were more concerned about the possibility of parasocial break-up.

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 imaginary characters from television series or films. Consistent with earlier research, male participants predominantly chose male characters (81.7%), whereas only 47% of the women chose female characters ( $\chi^2(1, N = 381) = 31.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Males (70.9%) were more likely than females (57.8%) to choose hosts rather than imaginary characters ( $\chi^2(1, N = 381) = 6.02$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

## Hypotheses

The first hypothesis predicted that parasocial interaction and expected break-up distress would be positively related. Break-up distress and interaction were significantly correlated  $r = .58$ ,  $p < .001$ . This correlation remained significant and varied little across sex, attachment groups, and type of characters chosen. Controlling for viewing hours also did not affect the size of this correlation. Thus,  $H1$  was supported.

It was hypothesized that the anxious group would have the highest interaction ( $H2$ ) and expected break-up distress ( $H3$ ) scores, followed by the secure group and finally that the avoidant group would be lowest on both measures. Because parasocial interaction and expected break-up distress are theorized to depend on attachment, and because they are strongly correlated, the hypotheses for both interaction and break-up were tested together, using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). In this analysis, parasocial interaction and expected break-up distress were used as dependent variables and attachment as the independent variable. Based on Cohen's (1997) findings that sex and relationship status influenced the association between attachment and parasocial relationships, sex was added as another factor in the model. Relationship status was not added to the model because the majority of respondents were

in relationships at the time of the study: 53.3% were married, and an additional 27% were dating. Given the already small size of the anxious group, separating the single respondents would mean that the single anxious cell size would become unacceptably small. However, in a univariate *t*-test, no significant differences were found between respondents who were in relationships and those who were not on either of the dependent variables.

A MANOVA was conducted using the General Linear Model procedure with pairwise contrasts between the three attachment groups. For parasocial interaction, between-participants main effects were found for sex,  $F(1,369) = 7.36, p < .01$ , and marginally for attachment,  $F(2,369) = 3.03, p = .05$ , but no significant sex by attachment interaction was found. Planned comparisons revealed that, as predicted, anxious respondents reported the highest levels of parasocial interaction ( $M = 3.23, SD = .56$ ), but that secure respondents ( $M = 2.79, SD = .87$ ) and avoidants ( $M = 2.85, SD = .78$ ) reported similarly low means. Pairwise contrasts revealed a significant contrast between the anxious and secure groups ( $p = .015$ ) and a marginally significant difference between the anxious and avoidant groups ( $p = .053$ ). No significant difference was found between secure and avoidant respondents. *H2* was, therefore, partially supported with respect to anxious viewers.

A significant between-participants effect for expected break-up distress was found for attachment,  $F(2,369) = 5.34, p < .01$ , but no significant effects were found for sex or the sex by attachment interaction. Planned comparisons revealed that, as predicted, anxious respondents reported the highest levels of anxiety about break-up ( $M = 2.22, SD = .60$ ), secure respondents reported similarly lower levels ( $M = 1.72, SD = .66$ ) as did avoidants ( $M = 1.70, SD = .60$ ). Pairwise contrasts revealed a significant contrast between the anxious group and both other groups (anxious vs. avoidants  $p = .003$ ; anxious vs. secure  $p = .001$ ). No significant difference was found between secure and avoidant respondents. Thus, *H3* was partially supported.

Because the expected break-up distress and relationship measures were administered simultaneously, and expected break-up distress was a hypothetical projection measure, it is impossible to use this study's data to establish the theoretical claim that the relationship precedes break-up and should therefore explain it. However, to test for this very likely possibility, an ANCOVA model was constructed with break-up as a dependent variable and the parasocial relationship measure as a covariate. Attachment and sex were used as independent variables.

This model explained the variance in break-up much better than the MANOVA model. In this model, parasocial relationship was the primary explanation for break-up,  $F(1,368) = 180.89, p < .001$ , sex was not a significant factor, and attachment was marginally significant,  $F(1,368) = 2.807, p = .062$ . No significant sex by attachment interaction was found. The fact that the impact of attachment was made much smaller by the inclusion of parasocial relationship as a covariate instead of a second dependent variable suggests that attachment is linked to parasocial expected break-up distress mostly through its impact on the intensity of parasocial relationships (Cohen, 1997; Cole & Leets, 1999), but that there is also a small direct effect. This analysis suggests that the intensity of parasocial relationships mediates the effect of attachment on parasocial break-up distress.

## Discussion

The present study demonstrates that attachment models that are shaped through childhood experiences with primary caregivers are linked not only to responses within romantic relationships in adulthood, but also within the realm of imaginary relationships. The findings replicate earlier studies showing that attachment styles are linked to the intensity of parasocial relationships, and extend these findings to the way television viewers react to the possibility of being separated from their favorite character. Specifically, this study replicated Cole and Leets' (1999) findings that anxiously attached television viewers are the most intensely involved in their parasocial relationships, and found that they are also most concerned about the break-up of these relationships. These findings support the conclusion that parasocial relationships depend on the same psychological processes that influence close relationships.

Thus, this study makes theoretical contributions to both our understanding of parasocial relationships and to the growing literature on attachment. Given the pervasiveness of parasocial relationships, and the great effort made by the television industry to create, strengthen, and perpetuate such relationships, it is important to understand not only the impact of such relationships in terms of persuasion and media effects, but also the possible emotional effects of their dissolution. This study provides a first look at the possibility that the break-up of parasocial relationships may evoke negative emotions especially in individuals already prone to suffer from interpersonal break-ups.

The finding that the impact of attachment on parasocial break-ups is mediated primarily through the intensity of the relationships themselves makes sense; it strengthens rather than weakens the main claim of this study. Because this study used hypothetical cross-sectional measurement of both the parasocial relationship and expected break-up distress, a sequential, causal model is impossible to prove, but the evidence that this mediation occurs is in line with attachment theory. Bowlby (1980) argued that in attachment relationships the intensity of the relationship and the dependence people develop on such relationships explains how they react when the relationship is severed. Though this study deals with symbolic relationships, the ANCOVA seems to suggest that the same dynamic operates in such relationships. However, because of the way this study was conducted, it is impossible to prove this argument and further research needs to explore this avenue.

The present findings provide additional support to the notion that parasocial relationships should be seen as an extension of viewers' social relationships rather than as compensation for the lack thereof. If parasocial relationships were compensating for a lack of social relationships, it would be expected that avoidants, who have trouble with intimacy, would have the strongest parasocial relationships, which are safer than social relationships but are built on simulated intimacy. It would also be expected that secure viewers, who are most likely to be satisfied with their social

relationships, would have significantly less intense parasocial relationships, and certainly be less concerned about losing them. However, this is not what the data revealed.

If attachment styles predict how distressed viewers will become at being separated from favorite characters, then the boundaries of attachment research extend beyond social relationships. These results, then, provide strong support for Bowlby's suggestion that mental models of attachment shape our entire relational environment, and not only the dynamics of close relationships. Though the attachment system is a very basic behavioral system we share with other primates, it seems that even highly symbolic relationships that include no physical components are influenced by this system. Further research should explore the mechanisms (e.g., mental models) that link imaginative and symbolic interactions to the most basic needs for human affection and care.

While most of us would agree that losing a close friend or partner creates more distress than the loss of a favorite soap star or newscaster, there is no doubt that media stars make up a part of our relational network. Koenig and Lessan (1985) found that viewers rated favorite television characters as closer to themselves than acquaintances, but less close than friends. But even if, for most of us, media personalities are not very close to us, and would not be considered attachment figures, many famous cases of fans getting together to protest the removal of a show or a character suggest that some people are strongly attached to their favorite media characters. Though in the present sample reported reactions to parasocial break-up were quite mild (less than 2 on a 1–5-point scale), further research among more targeted populations (e.g., devoted viewers, fan-club members) may find higher levels of distress. It is also noteworthy that even with the low levels of parasocial break-up distress, the relationships of break-up distress with attachment and the intensity of parasocial relationships were generally consistent with expectations.

Participants were asked to respond to the parasocial expected break-up distress scale using a hypothetical break-up scenario. It is possible, therefore, that the results of this study do not reflect the actual responses viewers would have if their favorite characters went off the air. However, because the theoretical underpinnings of this study involve mental models rather than behavioral responses, it is fitting to use a hypothetical method of measurement. It is likely that the responses are heavily influenced by naïve theories of break-ups rather than memories of actual experiences. Nonetheless, the different pattern of responses found among adults with different attachment styles shows that such naïve theories are linked to attachment styles (which is not surprising) and that they are applied to parasocial relationships as well as romantic relationships and friendships. Additional methodological advantages of the hypothetical approach are that it does not rely on reconstructing old experiences from memory nor does it limit respondents in choosing the character. In addition, the hypothetical method removes any variance due to other events that may have coincided with the dissolution of a parasocial relationship and may have

affected the reactions to the break-up (e.g., an end or start of another relationship, a geographical move, or other life change).

Finally, it is worth speculating as to the reason why parasocial relationships seem to be so similar to social relations even though there are many substantive differences. It is generally thought that parasocial relationships are functionally equivalent to social relationships, and that this similarity in function is responsible for the similarity in the way people behave in both types of relationships. It is also possible that people simply have not developed separate ways of thinking about relationships that are imaginary rather than real. Or, as Caughey (1985) may argue, the distinction between real and imaginary relationships is in fact illusory. Our relationships with family and friends exist through interactions, some of which are interpersonal but many of which happen in our heads. As we rehearse conversations or re-enact interactions to make sense of them, we are carrying out imaginary interactions within real relationships. Furthermore, the range of relationship partners we have includes people who are real, but our relationships with them are imaginary. For example, while our political leaders are very real, as are the consequences of their actions, we know them only through the media. In terms of our feelings toward them, the quality of the interaction we have with them, or their reality in our lives, is probably more similar to a television or movie star than to a family member or co-worker.

As our network of relationships becomes more varied, the distinction between social and parasocial relationships, which Horton and Wohl (1956) assumed was so obvious, is increasingly complex and hard to define. It is not surprising, therefore, that research is increasingly pointing to the similarities between the different ways we relate to others. To explain the potential impact of our relationships with media characters, we need, then, to focus not only on media content and production, but also on the experiences and personality traits that viewers bring to the screen.

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