When Good *Friends* Say Goodbye: A Parasocial Breakup Study

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This study examines viewers' reactions to parasocial breakup with mediated characters in light of interpersonal and mass communication theories. Following the airing of the last episode of the television show Friends, *279 students completed surveys assessing their viewing habits, their attitudes toward the show and their favorite character, and their loneliness. The intensity of the parasocial relationship with the favorite character is the strongest predictor of breakup distress. Other predictors include commitment and affinity to the show, the character's perceived popularity, and the participant's loneliness. The results shed light on the similarities and differences between parasocial and social relationships.*

Final episodes of long-running and greatly loved television series achieve famously high ratings (Battaglio, 2001). It was hardly surprising, then, that an estimated 51 million viewers tuned in to view the final episode of *Friends,* which aired in the United States on May 6, 2004 (Associated Press, 2004). Although viewers were no doubt aware that they would be able to see their friends from *Friends* over and over again in reruns and DVDs, the last episode seemed to mark a farewell of some import to many millions. The vast majority of viewers know that their relationships with television characters are imaginary (Caughey, 1985), and yet, as the ratings numbers and the general commotion around this and other finale shows suggest, the end of such relationships is emotionally meaningful. What do viewers feel when relationships with television characters come to an end? To what extent are separations from television characters similar to endings of personal relationships? What factors impact the intensity of feelings associated with such breakups? Which viewers experience these feelings more strongly than others? This study attempts to answer these questions with data collected from viewers immediately after the end of *Friends.*

This study is set within the framework of parasocial relationships (PSRs). Initially defined by Horton and Wohl (1956) as a "seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer" (p. 215), PSRs have been widely studied, both in terms of

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their development and in terms of their influences on viewers' emotional states and reactions to television exposure (e.g., Auter, 1992; Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Turner, 1993). PSRs are now understood to be an integral and important part of many people's systems of social relationships and "the distinction between social and parasocial relationships, which Horton and Wohl [1956] assumed was so obvious, is increasingly complex and hard to define" (Cohen, 2004, p. 200). As discussed later, the topic of PSRs is, in fact, now recognized as a potential contact point between mass media and interpersonal theories (Turner, 1993). Researchers are increasingly applying interpersonal, relational, and developmental theories to the study of PSRs (Cohen, 2003; Cole & Leets, 1999; Isotalus, 1995). This study contributes to this literature by applying aspects from theories of relational development to the study of people's parasocial relationships with mediated characters. It extends this literature by examining the application of theoretical premises regarding relational dissolution to the study of the termination of imaginary relationships.

Friends

Friends came on the air in 1994 following NBC's success with *Seinfeld,* and like its predecessor, was created as a sitcom set not in a family home or business, but rather focused on a group of young single adults. In an age of segmented viewing when the viewing unit is no longer composed solely of nuclear families, the time was ripe to experiment with moving the focus of sitcoms away from families. Furthermore, a program about young, urban singles made sense based on the belief that viewers relate and identify with those who are similar to them and the special attractiveness of the 18-to-30 demographic to advertisers. However, unlike *Seinfeld,* famous for being a show about "nothing" (CNN, 1998; TV Tome, 2005), *Friends* was a show about something: It explored the interpersonal relationships of its stars as a basis for its plot and humor. This heightened the potential for viewers to feel like they were a part of this group of friends, a feeling Auter and Palmgreen (2000) showed to be an important part of relationships with the characters. Over 10 years viewers were invited to watch these six friends interact, learn about them in intimate and meaningful ways, and vicariously experience the trials and tribulations of young adulthood. Most of the college students who took part in this study were still in elementary school when the show first aired and grew up watching the show. It is thus not surprising that the show's ending would be an emotional experience for many of them.

Parasocial Relationship

As the significance of PSRs in the process of media influence has become more apparent (Basil, 1996; Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003; Papa et al., 2000), researchers have become interested in exploring such relationships and understanding how they impact viewers. Somewhat to their surprise, researchers have consistently found that

relationships with television characters do not replace relationships with friends, but rather complement social relationships (Kanazawa, 2002; Perse & Rubin, 1990; Tsao, 1996). Feelings toward television characters do not generally serve as a replacement for primary social relationships but rather keep one company (Isotalus, 1995) and like ordinary friendships serve to provide people with social enjoyment and learning.

PSRs are a set of feelings viewers develop toward media characters that allow viewers to think and feel toward characters as if they know and have a special connection with them. These feelings extend beyond the moment of viewing (Horton & Wohl, 1956) and continue from one viewing situation to the next. Such relationships originate from repeated viewing of characters that simulate social interaction, and they develop and strengthen over time (Isotalus, 1995; Perse & Rubin, 1989; R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987; but see also Auter & Palmgreen, 2000). As viewers are exposed to characters over a longer period of time and more frequently, they develop more confidence in their attribution of how the character will behave and have less uncertainty in their relationships.

Television characters provide viewers with one-way relationships, and the intimacy they offer is, as Horton and Wohl (1956) argued, only at a distance. Nonetheless, Koenig and Lessan (1985) found that viewers rated favorite television characters as further from themselves than friends but closer than acquaintances. Newton and Buck (1985) concluded their findings by suggesting that television can be seen as a significant other. Thus, television personalities are a significant part of one's social network, although their social and emotional functions seem to be limited compared to close family and friends.

In terms of their effects, Fisherkeller (1997) suggested that at least for some teens, media characters serve as models for how to achieve goals that are related to the development of their identities. Other scholars have shown that imaginary relationships with media characters have real social consequences, such as increasing the persuasive power of public service announcements when they feature celebrities with whom viewers have PSRs (Basil, 1996; Brown et al., 2003). Similarly, Sood and Rogers (2000) linked the effects of education-entertainment programming to the development of PSRs with soap opera characters. Most recently, Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes (2005) found that parasocial contact and relationships can change attitudes about homosexuality. The importance of mediated relationships, and their similarity to social relationships, therefore, suggests that the end of a long-standing and popular show like *Friends* should also be significant and that it may be a cause of some distress. It also remains to be seen whether and how the one-way and distant nature of such PSRs leads to differences in the responses to their end.

Parasocial Breakup

The notion of parasocial breakup (PSB; Cohen, 2003) describes a situation where a character with whom a viewer has developed a PSR goes off the air. This may happen

because a show ends, because a character is taken off the show, or because something happens to the actor or actress who plays the character. In turn, a viewer may decide to stop watching the show or become less interested in or less devoted to the character.

The dissolution of close social relationships has been found to lead to depression and is a common reason for seeking psychological counseling (McCarthy, Lambert, & Brack, 1997). In regard to celebrities, Meyrowitz (1994) described extreme reactions exhibited at the death of celebrities such as Elvis Presley and John Lennon. Based on his analysis of these extreme cases and his discussion of more general patterns of responses to the death of what he called "media friends," he concluded that, "these relationships have features that are very human, very warm, and very caring" (p. 80). Although the myths, rituals, and pilgrimages that have come to surround the death of media megastars do not characterize common responses to the end of most television series, they do point to the emotional potential of imaginary relationships.

Research has found that though the dissolution of parasocial relationships is less stressful than that of close relationships, it follows some similar patterns (Cohen, 2003, 2004). Cohen asked respondents to imagine how they would feel if their favorite television persona would be taken off the air. He found that like in social relationships the stress of (imagined) breakup was strongly related to the intensity of the relationships. However, women, who generally report stronger PSRs (e.g., Tsao, 1996), did not report expecting higher levels of distress if their favorite television personality went off the air (Cohen, 2003). This finding echoes the fact that, although women tend to have stronger interpersonal relationships, they are better able to cope with the end of these relationships (Helgeson, 1994; Simpson, 1987; Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998). Teenagers who are generally seen as more emotional and more involved with media characters than adults were also found to expect stronger emotional responses to PSB than adults (Cohen, 2003).

These studies were able to confirm the idea of PSB by showing that people expected to be sorry when their favorite character went off the air, and to establish a basis for comparing PSB to social breakup. However, the hypothetical nature of the studies leaves several issues open. First, it is possible that although people expect to be distressed when a liked character goes off the air (perhaps because they use heuristics from interpersonal relationships) in reality such separations will leave viewers with little distress. Alternatively, one could imagine that the distress and sadness felt in real time may be much greater than the low levels reported in a hypothetical study. In addition, because previous studies focused on finding similarities between social breakup and PSB, they did not provide a basis for explaining what people feel and why some are more distressed than others.

Based on the similarities between PSRs and social relationships both in relationship development and dissolution it seems logical to turn to the literature on breakup of personal relationships to hypothesize regarding the breakup of relationships with television characters. In considering the applicability of research on the breakup of close relationships to understanding audience reactions to PSRs, several factors must

be considered. First, despite the popularity of some media friends, the reliance of viewers on media characters is relatively small. From a dependence perspective, Drigotas and Rusbult (1992) found that dependence on a relationship for satisfying needs was related to less likelihood of breaking up. It is likely, then, that the less one is dependent on a relationship for need satisfaction the less distress its breakup should cause. Therefore, the levels of distress from PSB are expected to be lower than those found in close relationships. Second, whereas romantic breakups often catch the noninitiating partner unprepared, in today's media-saturated environment the ending of popular shows is preceded by a long period of preparation. This preparation is likely to reduce the distress of the breakup, as is the lack of guilt surrounding the breakup. In sum, it is unlikely that very high levels of distress are experienced following PSB.

Because successful television shows often last several years, relationships with popular characters are likely to be well-established, long-term relationships. Because duration of relationship has been found to be positively associated with distress at breakup (Simpson, 1987), it is likely that long-term viewers will experience stronger distress than viewers who have watched over a short period of time. Similarly, closeness has been found to also positively predict distress (Simpson, 1987), suggesting that commitment to viewing the show—not just viewing duration—may serve a similar function. In other words, it is not just the frequency or amount of viewing that is important, but the quality of viewing and the extent to which people feel that they are dedicated to the show are also meaningful aspects to examine. In addition, the attractiveness of media characters and the public acknowledgment of such attractiveness are likely to increase the desirability of the relationship and the distress at its dissolution. Finally, Simpson found that believing one could not easily find a desirable alternative partner made the breakup more distressing. Applying this to PSB, to the extent that relationships with characters that are perceived to be more popular are seen as more socially desirable, it can be expected that the more popular the character with which one is breaking up, the more distress will be experienced.

Hypotheses

The main goal of this study is to identify the predictors of PSB. However, as assumptions regarding PSB follow closely from those regarding PSRs, it is first important to replicate earlier research to establish the predictors of PSR in the sample reported here. Following this replication analysis, a series of hypotheses are posed regarding the predictors of PSB.

Clearly, the most important factor in explaining and predicting the distress viewers feel when faced with the dissolution of a PSR is how intensely they feel toward the character with whom they engage in the PSR. Therefore:

H_1: The more intense the PSR the more distress viewers will report following PSB.

Because the duration of and commitment to a personal relationship are related to postbreakup distress, the following hypotheses are offered in the context of PSBs:

H$_2$: The longer a viewer reports watching *Friends* the more distress he or she will report following the end of the show.

H$_3$: The more committed viewers report themselves to be to watching *Friends* the more distress they will report following the end of the show.

Because PSRs in an ensemble show such as *Friends* are developed within the context of the show as a whole it would be expected that the emotional connection that is lost at the breakup of such relationships would be affected by one's attachment to or affinity to the show as a whole.

H$_4$: The more a viewer holds positive attitudes toward the show the more distress he or she will report following the end of the show.

In addition to show-related variables, clearly PSB should be associated with factors related to the characters. The extent to which the relationship with the character is valued should increase the distress that its dissolution will cause. Hence, the following hypotheses are offered:

H$_5$: The more a viewer reports his or her favorite *Friends* character is *perceived as being his or her overall favorite television character* the more distress he or she will report following the end of the show.

H$_6$: The more a viewer reports finding his or her favorite *Friends* character *attractive* the more distress he or she will report following the end of the show.

Based on research showing that the more the partner is perceived as hard to replace the more distressing is the breakup, it would be expected that:

H$_7$: The more a viewer considers his or her favorite *Friends* character to be *popular* (among others) the more distress he or she will report after the end of the show.

To test these hypotheses, a survey was circulated among college students over a 2-week period starting about 10 days after the airing of the last episode of *Friends.* Because new episodes were generally aired once a week, on Thursday, viewers should have started missing the show only a week after the last episode. Hence, data collection started on the Monday following the completion of this 1-week period.

Method

Sample

Participants in this study were 298 undergraduate students at a large West Coast university. This sample is similar to that employed in much previous research on

PSRs, which has focused on the same population (Auter, 1992; Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Turner, 1993). Additionally, the focus of this study on one show that has been a top-rated television show for years minimizes concerns about the lack of generalizability of college students' typical viewing habits to other populations.

The students completed a survey voluntarily and received credit for a communication course as compensation for their participation. Nineteen students (6%) reported never having watched even one episode of the show and were excluded from further data analyses, resulting in a sample of 279 participants. Of these participants, 225 (81%) were women and 52 (19%) were men. Two participants did not report their gender. The average age of participants was 19.46 years ($SD = 1.36$), with a range of 18 to 27 years.

Procedure

One week after the final episode of *Friends* was aired in the United States, pen-and-paper surveys were made available for participants to complete at their convenience. The period of 1 week after the final episode aired was chosen because *Friends* was a weekly sitcom and it was therefore expected that viewers would feel the loss of the show and miss it about a week after the last episode aired, when a new episode did not air in its usual time. To take into consideration the length of time that passed between the last episode being aired and the questionnaire completion, participants were asked to indicate the date on which they completed the survey.[1] The majority of the participants (61%) completed the survey during the first week in which it was made available (i.e., between 1 and 2 weeks after the final episode of the show was aired). About one fourth of the sample (25%) completed the survey between 2 and 3 weeks after the final episode was aired, and only 12% completed the survey between 3 and 4 weeks after the final episode was aired.

Measurement

The survey included questions about participants' PSR and reactions to the breakup of their relationship with their favorite *Friends* character, their viewing of the show *Friends* (both duration of viewing and commitment to the show), their affinity toward the show, their attitudes toward and feelings about their favorite character on the show, as well as questions about participants' loneliness and demographics. The show *Friends* revolved around six main characters: Monica, Rachel, Phoebe, Joey, Chandler, and Ross. Participants were asked to indicate which of the six characters was their favorite and respond to statements about this character.

Parasocial Relationship. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with five statements assessing the intensity of their PSR with their favorite character. Re-

sponse options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The commonly used A. M. Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) measure of parasocial interaction has often been adapted in previous research, for example, to measure related yet more generalized constructs, such as parasociability, a person's likelihood to parasocially interact (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000). The measure also has been widely criticized for measuring other types of relationships with and perceptions of characters (e.g., identification, realism; Cohen, 2001). In addition, in this study the authors were concerned with the strength of the relationship with characters rather than measuring the level or quality of interaction that occurs during viewing. Thus, in this study, items were specifically chosen because they are believed to tap most directly the concept of PSRs, and not other related concepts (see the Appendix).

Responses to these items were averaged together to create a measure of PSR, with a Cronbach reliability of $\alpha = .71$. Although this value is lower than most previously published assessments of the scale's reliability (e.g., Perse & Rubin, 1990; A. M. Rubin et al., 1985), it is consistent with other studies (e.g., Hoffner, 1996). Additionally, participants' average scores on the scale in this study ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 0.67$) are consistent with previous research on the construct, where scores ranged from about 2.70 ($SD = 0.68$; A. M. Rubin et al., 1985) to 3.86 ($SD = 0.67$; Hoffner, 1996).

There was a significant difference between the genders, $t(273) = 2.91$, $p < .01$, with men reporting significantly less PSR with their favorite *Friends* character ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 0.73$) than women ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.65$). The difference in PSR between the genders found in this study is consistent with past research (Cohen, 2004; Eyal & Rubin, 2003). Also attesting to the validity of this measure is the fact that PSR is positively correlated with both affinity toward the show ($r = .69$, $p < .001$) and the extent to which the character is a favorite one on television overall ($r = .48$, $p < .001$).

Parasocial Breakup.　Thirteen items assessed participants' PSB with their favorite *Friends* character after the show went off the air. These items were taken from Cohen (2003), where the concept of PSB was explicated and the scale constructed and validated. Items represent both an emotional dimension (e.g., "Now that my favorite *Friends* character is off the air, I feel more lonely") and a behavioral one (e.g., "Now that my favorite *Friends* character is off the air, I tend to think of him or her often"; see Appendix for a complete list of items). Responses to these items ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), and scores were averaged to create a measure of PSB, with a Cronbach reliability of $\alpha = .81$. Participants averaged below the midpoint of the scale ($M = 2.16$, $SD = 0.53$), but slightly higher than previous samples that responded to this scale (Cohen, 2003). There was a significant difference between the genders, $t(271) = 3.29$, $p < .001$, with men reporting significantly less distress following PSB with their favorite *Friends* character ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 0.49$) than women ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 0.54$). Similar to Cohen, this study finds a strong and positive correlation between PSB and PSR ($r = .68$, $p < .001$). The consistency in the measure of PSB between this study and Cohen's study, which was conducted in Israel and included samples of different ages (including a

high school student sample and an adult sample), suggests that the measure of PSB is reliable and valid across different ages and cultures.

   Viewing of the Show. Participants had followed the show an average of 5.72 years (*SD* = 2.96), longer than half the period of 10 years it was on the air. Participants' level of commitment to the show was assessed by asking about their dedication to viewing episodes of the show during the final season, with response options ranging from 1 (*I used to watch the show but stopped before it came off the air*) to 5 (*I never missed an episode and even taped ones I missed*). Participants were fairly committed to the show as evidenced by their average score of 2.99 (*SD* = 0.97) on the 5-point scale, suggesting that on average they tended to watch episodes of *Friends* whenever they had a chance to do so throughout the past season. The two measures of amount of viewing the show and commitment to the show were moderately and positively correlated with one another (*r* = .41, *p* < .001).

   Attitudes Toward the Show. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with 15 statements about the show. These statements assessed attitudes and behaviors toward the show, specifically evaluating the affinity that viewers felt toward the show and how much they liked it. Affinity toward the show reflects a positive disposition toward it and an intention to view it because of an emotional connection to the show, whereas viewing amount merely reflects the frequency of viewing, be it incidental or as a result of others in the household watching it. Affinity toward the show also reflects such positive dispositions before and after the viewing itself, such as searching for information about the show on the Internet, thinking about the show before and after it is aired, and considering the show to be important to one's life. Examples of items include, "I enjoy watching *Friends*," "When *Friends* comes on, I switch the channel" (reverse coded), and "I really get involved in what happens to the characters on *Friends*." The full list of items is included in the Appendix.

   Response options to this measure ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Responses to all 15 statements were averaged to create one measure of affinity toward the show. The Cronbach reliability of this measure was α = .91. Participants averaged slightly above the midpoint of the scale (*M* = 3.27, *SD* = 0.71), with significant differences between the two genders, *t*(275) = 6.75, *p* < .001. Men reported significantly less affinity toward the show (*M* = 2.71, *SD* = 0.71) than women (*M* = 3.39, *SD* = 0.65).

   It should be noted that the measure of affinity to the show was positively correlated with both amount of viewing the show (*r* = .49, *p* < .001) and with commitment to the show (*r* = .63, *p* < .001). These correlations are consistent with the notion that those who watch the show frequently and those who are committed and dedicated viewers will have more positive attitudes toward the show. However, the moderate correlation between amount of viewing and affinity toward the show suggests that the two measures tap different constructs. The higher correlation with commitment to the show is also not surprising considering that commitment to the show likely implies a

positive disposition toward it. However, the two constructs do not fully overlap with one another, as commitment reflects primarily an attitude while viewing whereas affinity toward the show extends beyond the duration of viewing itself.

Attitudes Toward the Favorite Friends *Character.* Participants were asked to what extent their favorite *Friends* character is also their favorite television character overall, with response options ranging from 1 (*My favorite* Friends *character is my LEAST favorite overall TV character*) to 5 (*My favorite* Friends *character is my MOST favorite overall TV character*). For many respondents the favorite *Friends* character was also a favorite character on television overall, evidenced by the average response to this item being slightly above the midpoint of the scale ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.97$).

Participants were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement that their favorite *Friends* character is attractive. On a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), participants averaged 3.62 ($SD = 1.04$) on this measure, indicating they found their favorite *Friends* character to be fairly attractive. There were significant differences on this measure, $F(5, 267) = 14.83$, $p < .001$, with Rachel emerging as the most attractive favorite character ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.65$) and as significantly more attractive than all other characters, except Monica. Ross was the least attractive ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.97$).

To assess the perceived popularity of each of the *Friends* characters, participants were asked to rank the six characters in terms of perceived popularity. In other words, participants were asked to rate each character in terms of their perceptions of how popular they were among other viewers. Participants ranked the characters from 1 (*most popular*) to 6 (*least popular*), providing an ordinal-level measure of character popularity. This is in contrast to the PSR and PSB measures that assess the degree to which the participant himself or herself likes the character.

Participant Measures. In addition to asking for participants' gender and age, their level of loneliness was also assessed. Previous research has not found loneliness to be as strong a predictor of PSR intensity as was initially speculated (A. M. Rubin et al., 1985), but whereas this variable may be less meaningful in the creation of imaginary relationships, it may play a central role in the reactions to the dissolution of these relationships. After all, people who have fewer social relationships may experience greater difficulty letting go of any relationship, even an imaginary one. Participants were asked to respond to 12 statements about themselves, including "I often feel in tune with the people around me," and "I have trouble making friends." Most of the items were adapted from the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996). Four items were added to tap the more social dimensions of loneliness (e.g., "I have trouble making friends"). The full list of items can be found in the Appendix. Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Responses were averaged to create an overall loneliness score, with a Cronbach $\alpha = .88$. Participants averaged 2.05 on the scale ($SD = 0.54$), indicating overall low levels of loneliness. There was a significant

difference between the genders, $t(272) = -2.47$, $p < .05$, with men reporting significantly more loneliness ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 0.58$) than women ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 0.53$).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Of the six *Friends* characters, more participants (31%) chose Rachel as their favorite character. She was followed by Chandler (20%), Joey (20%), Phoebe (14%), and finally Ross (7%) and Monica (5%). The usual pattern of gender choices was found, although in a less pronounced fashion, as the majority (60%) of participants chose favorite *Friends* characters of their own gender. Men were far more likely to choose male characters (76%) as their favorite than female characters (24%). Although to a lesser degree, women were also more likely to choose female characters (59%) than male characters as favorites (41%). The trend of choosing same-sex characters was significantly more pronounced for men than for women, $\chi^2(1, N = 271) = 5.59$, $p < .05$.

Table 1 details the distribution of choices of favorite characters, along with the mean PSR and PSB scores and popularity rank for each *Friends* character. As the table illustrates, Rachel, who was most frequently chosen as favorite, was also the character with whom participants felt the strongest PSR ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.60$) and PSB ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 0.56$).

Table 1
Choice of Favorite *Friends* Character, PSR, PSB, and Perceived Popularity of Character Relative to All Other *Friends* Characters

Character	N	PSR		PSB		Popularity	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Rachel	87	3.37	0.60	2.31	0.56	1.87	1.60
Chandler	57	3.08	0.67	2.06	0.44	3.67	1.18
Joey	56	3.08	0.61	2.18	0.53	3.27	1.62
Phoebe	39	2.99	0.58	2.08	0.52	4.27	1.62
Ross	19	2.68	0.65	1.90	0.44	4.73	1.79
Monica	15	3.13	0.78	2.09	0.58	3.20	1.01
Total	273						

Note: PSR = parasocial relationship; PSB = parasocial breakup. PSR response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores represent greater PSR with the character. PSB response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Higher scores represent greater PSB with the character. Lower popularity scores represent greater perceived popularity. Popularity was measured on an ordinal (rank order) scale, so that each character's score is dependent on all other characters' scores.

Consistent with past research (A. M. Rubin et al., 1985), participants' loneliness was not significantly associated with any of the other measures in the study, including affinity toward the show and attitudes toward the favorite character. Past research also has shown that loneliness and other social deficiencies are unrelated to parasocial relationships (Tsao, 1996).

As Table 1 indicates, in terms of perceived popularity, Rachel was also perceived to be the most popular *Friends* character, relative to all characters. Characters' popularity was related to attitudes toward the show and the favorite characters (popularity–show: $r = -.15$, $p < .05$; popularity–PSR: $r = -.20$, $p < .01$; popularity–PSB: $r = -.21$, $p < .01$). The more popular the favorite *Friends* character is perceived to be, the more affinity participants have toward the show, the greater the PSR with the character, and the greater the PSB.

Before proceeding to the main analysis, an analysis was conducted to replicate earlier findings by examining the predictors of PSR. Participants' gender and loneliness were entered on the first step. On the second step, program-related variables were entered: length of time participants had viewed the show, their commitment to the show, and their affinity toward the show. On the third step, character-related variables were entered, including the extent to which the *Friends* character chosen as favorite is an overall television favorite character, the perceived popularity of this character relative to all other *Friends* characters, and the character's attractiveness.

The results of the first regression assessing PSR predictors are presented in Table 2. Variance inflation factors (VIFs) for all independent variables in the regression were tested. None exceeded 2.57, indicating no problem with multicollinearity in this analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). The equation explained 51% of the variance in PSR. As can be seen, the remaining significant predictors of PSR in Step 3 are gender ($\beta = -0.17$, $p < .001$), affinity toward the show ($\beta = 0.63$, $p < .001$), the extent to which the favorite *Friends* character is an overall favorite television character ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < .05$), and the character's attractiveness ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < .001$).

Hypotheses Testing

The second stepwise regression equation examined the predictors of PSB with favorite *Friends* character. The same predictors used to examine PSR were entered into the regression, with two changes. First, PSB was entered as the dependent variable. Second, because of the prediction that PSR leads to PSB, PSR was entered on Step 4 of the regression analysis. Table 3 presents the results of this regression analysis. Again, VIFs for all independent variables in the regression were tested. None exceeded 2.59, indicating no problem with multicollinearity in this analysis. The equation explained 57% of the variance in PSB. As can be seen, the remaining significant predictors of PSB with favorite character were participants' loneliness ($\beta = 0.09$, $p < .05$), commitment to show ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < .01$), affinity toward show ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < .01$), perceived popularity of the favorite character relative to all other

Table 2
Summary of Stepwise Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting
Parasocial Relationship With Favorite *Friends* Character

Variable	B	SE B	β
Step 1			
Gender (females)	0.25	0.11	0.15*
Loneliness	0.00	0.08	0.00
Step 2			
Gender (females)	–0.17	0.08	–0.10*
Loneliness	0.05	0.06	0.04
Years	–0.01	0.01	–0.06
Commitment	–0.02	0.04	–0.04
Affinity toward show	0.74	0.06	0.77***
Step 3			
Gender (females)	–0.29	0.09	–0.17***
Loneliness	0.08	0.06	0.06
Years	–0.01	0.01	–0.06
Commitment	–0.03	0.04	–0.05
Affinity toward show	0.60	0.07	0.63***
Perceived character popularity (reversed)	0.00	0.02	0.01
Favorite character	0.08	0.04	0.12*
Character attractiveness	0.14	0.04	0.22***

Note: $N = 254$. Step 1: $R^2 = .02$, $F(2, 252) = 2.87$, $p < .06$. Step 2: $R^2 = .47$, $\Delta R^2 = .45$, $F(5, 249) = 44.04$, $p < .001$. Step 3: $R^2 = .51$, $\Delta R^2 = .04$, $F(8, 246) = 32.21$, $p < .001$.
*$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.

Friends characters ($\beta = -0.09$, $p < .05$), and PSR with the character ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < .001$).

Based on the preceding equations, Hypothesis 1 was supported, with PSR being the most significant predictor of PSB. Not surprisingly, the more intense the relationship was, the more distressed viewers were when it ended. The second hypothesis was not supported. After controlling for the intensity of the relationship, duration of viewing did not significantly predict PSB. Hypothesis 3 was supported with commitment to viewing the show significantly and positively predicting PSB. Affinity toward the show was found to significantly predict PSB, supporting Hypothesis 4. Hypothesis 5 was not supported because once PSR was controlled, the degree to which the favorite *Friends* characters were overall favorites did not significantly predict PSB. Hypothesis 6 was also not supported, as character attractiveness was not found to be a significant predictor of PSB. In support of Hypothesis 7, popularity emerged as a significant predictor of PSB, so that the more popular the character is perceived to be, the greater the PSB reported by participants.

Although the authors did not hypothesize this relationship, participants' loneliness was significantly related to PSB, when PSR was controlled, such that more lonely viewers were more distressed at breakup. This finding is interesting as, like in previous research (A. M. Rubin et al., 1985), loneliness did not predict PSR in this study but it did predict PSB. This finding is consistent with research that has

Table 3
Summary of Stepwise Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Parasocial Breakup With Favorite *Friends* Character

Variable	B	SE B	β
Step 1			
Gender (females)	0.27	0.09	0.20**
Loneliness	0.06	0.06	0.06
Step 2			
Gender (females)	–0.08	0.07	–0.06
Loneliness	0.09	0.05	0.10*
Years	0.00	0.01	0.01
Commitment	0.09	0.03	0.17**
Affinity toward the show	0.45	0.05	0.58***
Step 3			
Gender (females)	–0.12	0.07	–0.09+
Loneliness	0.11	0.05	0.12*
Years	0.00	0.01	0.00
Commitment	0.08	0.03	0.15*
Attitude toward show	0.37	0.06	0.48***
Perceived character popularity (reversed)	–0.03	0.02	–0.09+
Favorite character	0.06	0.03	0.11*
Character attractiveness	0.05	0.03	0.10+
Step 4			
Gender (females)	–0.03	0.07	–0.02
Loneliness	0.09	0.04	0.09*
Years	0.01	0.01	0.03
Commitment	0.10	0.03	0.18**
Attitude toward show	0.17	0.06	0.21**
Perceived character popularity	–0.03	0.02	–0.09*
Favorite character	0.04	0.03	0.07
Character attractiveness	0.01	0.03	0.01
Parasocial relationship	0.32	0.05	0.40***

Note: Step 1: $R^2 = .04$, $F(2, 249) = 5.23$, $p < .01$. Step 2: $R^2 = .47$, $\Delta R^2 = .43$, $F(5, 246) = 43.18$, $p < .001$. Step 3: $R^2 = .50$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(8, 243) = 29.86$, $p < .001$. Step 4: $R^2 = .57$, $\Delta R^2 = .07$, $F(9, 242) = 35.74$, $p < .001$.
$^+p < .10$. $^*p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

found that a person's psychological composition does contribute in some ways to the development of imaginary relationships (Turner, 1993) and seems to suggest that some psychological aspects are more relevant to the breakup of PSRs than to their development. The fact that the predictive value of loneliness remained above and beyond that of PSR intensity indicates that lonely viewers are likely more dependent on their relationships with their favorite characters and hence feel more anxious on relationship dissolution.

Overall, the results of this study show that, beyond PSR, the intensity of PSB is predicted by several other factors, including commitment and affinity to the show, the perceived popularity of the favorite *Friends* character relative to all other *Friends* characters, PSR with the favorite character, and loneliness. The results show that some of the predictions drawn from research on interpersonal relationships held up in mediated relationships, whereas other factors that impact personal breakups did not carry over to mediated relationships.

Discussion

The data in this study shed light on the factors that explain people's reactions to the end of a relationship with a television character. They indicate that viewers' reactions are explained by factors other than the intensity of such relationships. Other factors predicting the reactions to PSB, that remained significant after controlling for PSR, were commitment to the show, affinity to the show, the perceived popularity of the favorite character, and participants' loneliness. Together with PSR these factors explained 57% of the variance in reaction to PSB, suggesting that the use of theory from interpersonal settings to understand this phenomenon is warranted, but that mediated relationships operate somewhat differently than social relationships.

The generally low levels of PSB raise a few interesting issues. On the one hand they are consistent with previous research suggesting the reliability of the measure. On the other hand they suggest that although this study shows that reactions to PSB follow similar patterns as breakup in social contexts, they seem to be less stressful than breakup of close friendships or romantic relationships. In contrast, the higher levels of PSR reported in many studies suggest that the relationships themselves are quite enjoyable and meaningful. It may be, then, that the one-way nature of the intimacy involved in PSRs allows for enjoyable relationships that keep one company and entertain but do not facilitate great dependence, which would make the anxiety at the end of the relationship very strong. This finding is in line with Koenig and Lessan (1985), who suggested that television characters are closer to an individual than mere acquaintances, but not quite as close as friends. This suggests that some emotional distress is likely when mediated relationships dissolve but that this distress is likely to be weaker than the distress experienced following social breakups. In addition, the socially shared nature of the end of a series as well as the long lead time viewers have to expect such a breakup may mitigate its negative effects. Also, the fact that one of the

main characters in the show, Joey, was known to be starring in a new spinoff series starting the following fall season also could have contributed to the generally low levels of PSB reported in this sample. Finally, the relatively high frequency of reruns and repeated airing of the show's episodes, as well as the availability of DVD collections of the episodes, also likely alleviated some of the anxiety associated with the show's ending, as viewers knew they could rely on those for continued interactions with the show's characters. Still, one can conceive of reruns and DVDs for shows that no longer run as similar to looking at photos or home videos of a lost friend or partner. They may help, but it is not really the same. What is lost is the participation in the progression of the story.

That the duration of viewing did not predict PSB is surprising. It was expected that, like in other relationships, as relationships last longer their demise is more painful (Simpson, 1987). At the bivariate level the length of relationships was correlated with PSB ($r = .34$, $p < .001$) but this relationship disappeared once other variables were included in the model. This suggests that the effect of length of relationship on PSB operates through variables like commitment and affinity rather than directly.

The importance of commitment to PSB (but not to PSR) is noteworthy. It may be that commitment and intensity operate independently while in a relationship, but once the show goes off the air the disappointment is increased when viewers are committed. Because in this study PSB was measured so that it was related to the end of *Friends* as a whole and not only to removing a specific character, this feeling of disappointment may have spilled over into this measure. On the other hand, the PSR measure was specific to the favorite character and was not affected by these negative feelings. Perhaps a study exploring the removal of a character from an ongoing show would provide a better indication of whether the commitment to the show has an independent contribution to PSB.

Whereas affinity to the show is a predictor of both the intensity of the relationship and reactions to its dissolution, attraction predicts PSR but not PSB and commitment and popularity predict breakup but not the strength of the relationship itself. The fact that the perceived attractiveness predicted PSR but not PSB further suggests that how much one finds a partner attractive is crucial during the relationship but at breakup, perceptions of how others perceive the former partner are more important.

The contribution of popularity seems consistent with the notion that the stress following from the end of a relationship is related to the perception that others will see this as a loss of something valuable (Simpson, 1987). In other words, breaking up with someone who is perceived as a "great catch" and who is more likely to quickly move on is more damaging to one's self-image than a breakup with someone less socially valued. Although this argument makes little sense when applied to PSR it nonetheless seems to be part of the way viewers think about such relationships.

There are some differences between how respondents report feeling about their favorite characters (PSR) and how they believe others feel about the same character (perceived popularity). This demonstrates the individuality of such choices and that they are at least partially independent of perceptions of public celebrity. Specifically,

the data suggest that for those characters who are most liked (i.e., Rachel) and least liked (i.e., Ross), there is consistency in the extent to which they are liked by respondents, are perceived as popular, and the levels of PSR and PSB that participants experience with them. However, for other characters there is less congruence between the measures. It would be interesting for future investigations to examine the source of the discrepancy between individual liking and perceived popularity.

Finally, this study provides an interesting test of various theoretical explanations of gender differences in favorite character selection. It is well documented that when children are asked to select a favorite character, boys overwhelmingly prefer male characters, whereas girls select both male and female characters (Feilitzen & Linné, 1975; Hoffner, 1996; Reeves & Miller, 1978). A similar trend has been documented among college students and adults (Cohen, 1997, 2004). Three explanations are possible for these findings: (a) a psychological explanation argues that women have a greater capacity than men to empathize with those who are dissimilar from them; (b) a more sociological explanation suggests that because of the greater social status men enjoy it is deemed proper for women to admire men but not vice versa; and (c) an explanation based on gender media representation argues that there are more male characters and that they usually get better roles than female characters, making them more appealing to viewers of both genders (Reeves & Miller, 1978). This study of *Friends* provides a test of the third explanation in that there are three male and three female characters who enjoy relatively equal status on the show. The fact that the gender difference in selecting favorite characters appears in this study suggests that even when a show provides equal representation this does not eliminate gender difference in selections of favorite characters.

Additionally, this study extends the examination of gender differences in PSRs by testing the mechanisms through which such relationships occur. Previous studies often simply reported the correlations between gender and PSR at the bivariate level. This study found a strong gender difference on affinity toward the show and a strong correlation between affinity and PSR and PSB. Controlling for affinity, the relationships between gender and PSR and PSB change from positive to negative. It is likely that women's PSRs with television characters operate through their attitudes toward the shows and once such attitudes are statistically controlled, the relationship is reversed.

Some limitations of this study should be noted. First, the authors used a convenience sample of undergraduate students that consisted mostly of women. Future research should attempt to use more balanced samples as males and females differ on some key constructs, including PSRs. Second, this study excluded nonviewers of the show *Friends.* Those participants who reported never having watched at least one episode of the show were asked to answer only a few questions about themselves but were excused from responding to any questions about the show and its characters. Therefore, the authors were unable to compare these nonviewers to the viewers in the sample except to say that there was not a significant difference between them in terms of their loneliness scores, $t(293) = 0.95$, $p = .34$. Although fu-

ture research could benefit from comparing nonviewers with other viewers, especially heavy ones, in this study nonviewers constituted only 6.4% of the sample. Moreover, although nonviewers may exhibit some distress over the ending of the show, this is more likely to be a secondary effect resulting from the distress experienced by other people around them rather than a direct effect, and is not likely to have a profound psychological effect on these nonviewers.

The focus of this study was on PSB in a specific case where both the show and the character are going off the air. Future research should examine the nature of PSB with a character that is leaving an ongoing show. Researchers should also examine other genres. For example, with the growing popularity of reality shows, many of which eliminate characters on a regular basis, it would be interesting to examine how viewers react when their favorite character is "voted off" the show. Another genre is soap operas, which have often been studied with regard to PSRs (Perse & Rubin, 1990; A. M. Rubin & Perse, 1987; Sood & Rogers, 2000). Several generic differences exist between soap operas and situation comedies such as *Friends* and these may play a role in the levels of PSB exhibited by viewers. For example, the different tone of the show—dramatic in soap operas and humoristic in comedies—may be important. Also, on soap operas characters are frequently eliminated or the actors that portray them change while the show continues. The continuation of the show along with the large cast of characters that typify most soap operas may mean that the departure of one character is felt less strongly than when a show goes off the air altogether.

Another direction for future research is to examine the personality characteristics that viewers bring with them to the screen and how these interact with the experienced PSB. It has been established that there are some similarities between mediated and interpersonal relationships and that there are individual differences in how viewers react to the breakup of mediated relationships. Considering the overall low levels of PSB reported in this study, it may seem that the breakup of a mediated relationship is not a disturbing phenomenon for most people, but it may be a particularly upsetting situation for certain people who are especially attached to the mediated characters or who are prone to extreme effects of relationship dissolution. Research focusing on such extreme cases should include measures appropriate to assess individual differences, such as extreme emotionalism, and state variables such as depression and mental instability.

In sum, these findings oppose the view that developing attachments to characters is no more than an illusory and escapist diversion for lonely viewers and support the notion that mediated relationships are part of one's wider social life (Caughey, 1985). At the same time, it is becoming increasingly clear that scholars of mediated relationships need to start examining the differences, as well as the similarities, between social relationships and PSRs. PSRs seem to carry less emotional intensity than close or romantic relationships, and their one-sidedness seems to have implications for the way they develop, as does the more public nature of the shared knowledge there is about the characters and actors and the shows of which they are part. Solving the riddle of how mediated and social relationships compare with each other involves a

unique blend of perspectives from within the communication discipline. A better understanding of this question touches on questions of media effects, of technology and its effects on emotions and a sense of presence, and a keen understanding of interpersonal relationships. Thus, gaining new insights into mediated relationships promises to produce gains in each of these areas, and, more important, to enhance understanding of how they overlap and interact to provide new insights into the mysteries of human communication.

Appendix

Measure of Parasocial Relationship

1. I like my favorite *Friends* character.
2. I would like to meet my favorite *Friends* character in person.
3. I like to compare my ideas with what my favorite *Friends* character says.
4. My favorite *Friends* character makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.
5. I like hearing the voice of my favorite *Friends* character in my home.

Measure of Parasocial Breakup

1. Now that my favorite *Friends* character is off the air, I feel more lonely.
2. Now that my favorite *Friends* character is off the air, I feel angry.
3. Now that my favorite *Friends* character is off the air, I plan to watch other programs with the same actor.
4. Now that my favorite *Friends* character is off the air, I am less excited about watching TV.
5. Now that my favorite *Friends* character is off the air, I tend to think of him or her often.
6. Now that my favorite *Friends* character is off the air, I watch reruns or taped episodes of *Friends.*
7. Now that my favorite *Friends* character is off the air, I feel sad.
8. Now that my favorite *Friends* character is off the air, I don't miss him or her as much as I thought I would (reverse).
9. Now that my favorite *Friends* character is off the air, I feel like I lost a good friend.
10. Now that my favorite *Friends* character is off the air, I found a different TV personality to like (reverse).
11. Now that my favorite *Friends* character is off the air, I feel a void in my life.
12. Now that my favorite *Friends* character is off the air, I look for information about him or her in other places (e.g., talk shows, newspaper, Internet).
13. Now that my favorite *Friends* character is off the air, I feel disappointed.

Measure of Affinity Towards the Show *Friends*

1. I often search for information about *Friends* in magazines, online, and in other television shows or films.
2. I think that my life is a lot like that of the characters on *Friends.*
3. I wish I had friends like the characters on *Friends.*
4. I enjoy watching *Friends.*
5. *Friends* is very important to me.
6. I do not relate at all to the characters on *Friends* (reverse).
7. I rarely think about *Friends* before or after I watch the show (reverse).
8. I still hope that *Friends* will return to TV.
9. I often watch reruns of *Friends.*
10. When *Friends* comes on, I switch the channel (reverse).
11. I really get involved in what happens to the characters on *Friends.*
12. Watching *Friends* is a waste of my time (reverse).
13. I really get the characters on *Friends.*
14. I still can't believe *Friends* is off the air.
15. While viewing *Friends* I forget myself and am fully absorbed in the program.

Measure of Participants' Loneliness

1. I often feel in tune with the people around me (reverse).
2. I have many friends (reverse).
3. I often lack companionship.
4. I often feel alone.
5. I am satisfied with my social life (reverse).
6. I often feel there are people I can talk to (reverse).
7. I often feel there are people around me but not with me.
8. I have trouble making friends.
9. I often feel isolated from others.
10. I often feel close to other people (reverse).
11. I generally find that people want to be my friends (reverse).
12. I often feel my relationships with others are not meaningful.

Note

[1]The length of time that passed between the final *Friends* episode being aired and the completion of the survey by participants was significantly and negatively associated with their affinity toward the show ($r = -.13$, $p < .05$), their PSR with their favorite *Friends* character ($r = -.13$, $p < .05$), and their PSB with their favorite *Friends* character ($r = -.18$, $p < .01$). These negative correlations can be interpreted in two ways. It may be that the more time passed after the airing of the last episode, the less positive these attitudes became. Alternatively, it may be that those participants who had less affinity toward the show and the characters to begin with took longer to com-

plete the survey after the show ended. When entering this variable as a predictor in subsequent regression equations, it did not emerge as a significant predictor of either PSR or PSB. Because of this and because of the lack of clarity regarding the direction of causality with these outcomes, the variable of length of time between the show ending and survey completion was not included in data analyses.

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