How Do We React When Our Favorite Characters Are Taken Away? An Examination of a Temporary Parasocial Breakup

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This study examined reactions to a temporary parasocial breakup situation during the television writers' strike of 2007–2008 when many television shows stopped airing new episodes. Past research on parasocial breakups and uses and gratifications theory was used to predict emotional and behavioral reactions. Questionnaire results revealed that participants with stronger parasocial relationships experienced greater distress—even after controlling for the number of favorite programs that went off the air. Moreover, those with greater television affinity reported greater distress when their favorite show was disrupted, although television viewing motives also played a role in this process. Finally, when their favorite shows were no longer airing new episodes, viewers primarily replaced television viewing time with other media exposure rather than increasing nonmedia activities such as social interaction. However, a number of these activities varied by gender.

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Researchers and scholars have long acknowledged the role of engagement with characters in the media enjoyment experience. Indeed, television viewers develop a bond with the performers they see on-screen, and a type of relationship can develop between them. This bond has been referred to as a parasocial relationship, first named by Horton and Wohl (1956). Although these relationships are inherently one-sided, they otherwise share many commonalities with real-world relationships. Much research has examined the implications of parasocial relationships for media effects and media enjoyment. Related research has focused on how individuals react to a "parasocial breakup," such as when a favorite television character is taken off the air. Several studies have shown that the dissolution of a parasocial relationship can lead to varying degrees of emotional distress—much like a real relationship (Cohen, 2003, 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006). This line of research underscores the links between real-world relationships and parasocial relationships while also examining the factors that increase the emotional distress one experiences following a parasocial breakup. However, what is missing from this literature is an understanding of how individuals react to the frequent but temporary parasocial "separation" situations that typify television programming. For example, viewers experience regular disruptions to their favorite programs due to special programming that preempts the normal schedule or because of the seasonal hiatus of many programs throughout the year. What impact might these more frequent, temporary breakups have on viewers—particularly those who develop and depend on strong parasocial relationships with their favorite characters? Also missing from this line of research is an understanding of the behavioral outcomes of parasocial breakups. What activities do television viewers turn to when their favorite characters and programs are no longer available? To what extent are these parasocial relationships replaced with other media exposure as opposed to interpersonal and/or social activities?

To further explore these two gaps in the parasocial breakup literature, this article examines how viewers reacted to the disruption of a large number of television programs and characters during the television writers' strike of 2007–2008. This event provided a unique context in which to examine a different sort of parasocial breakup. However, this unique situation has natural application to the routine temporary breakup situations just noted. For this reason, the writers' strike offered a useful context in which to examine the parasocial breakup phenomenon. This research examines a number of important variables from past research on parasocial breakups, such as the intensity of the parasocial relationship, frequency of television viewing, and gender. Beyond this, we also incorporate a new theoretical component to further our understanding of which television viewers react most strongly to a parasocial breakup and why. In particular, we take a uses

and gratifications perspective to consider the role of television viewing motives and overall television affinity in emotional distress reactions. Moreover, we examine the extent to which television viewers engaged in alternative activities to replace their routine exposure to their favorite characters and shows.

THE WRITER'S STRIKE

On November 5, 2007, 12,000 Hollywood writers who were members of the Writers Guild of America went on strike (Booth & de Moraes, 2007). This strike, which lasted until February 10, 2008, caused a number of popular daily and weekly television shows to go off the air at different times, for differing periods of time. Six of the 10 top prime-time shows for October 29, 2007, to November 4, 2007 ("List of Top 20," 2007) were not aired as scheduled because of the writers' strike. As a result, many television viewers were abruptly unable to watch their favorite television show or character. The occurrence of a Hollywood writers' strike provides a unique opportunity to examine how individuals react when their favorite television shows and characters are suddenly unavailable with no certain return in sight.

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Parasocial relationships were originally described by Horton and Wohl (1956) as a "seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer" (p. 215). More generally, this concept refers to the one-way relationships that television viewers develop with the characters they view regularly. Parasocial relationships have been examined inasmuch as they can moderate media effects. For example, a parasocial relationship with a media character seems to increase the persuasive effects of a message (e.g., A. M. Rubin & Step, 2000), can facilitate acceptance of stigmatized groups through parasocial contact (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005, 2006), and increase media enjoyment (e.g., Isotalus, 1995).

These parasocial relationships develop over time as viewers begin to believe they understand the character and his or her personality, behavior, and values (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Perse & Rubin, 1989). Although TV viewers understand the difference between real relationships and parasocial ones, they react to these familiar characters as if they are a friend or acquaintance (Giles, 2002). Indeed, parasocial relationships share many of the same features as interpersonal relationships in the real world. Social attraction and perceived similarity in terms of attitudes and background are important

components of parasocial relationships, much like real relationships (R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Turner, 1993). Through parasocial relationships, television characters become incorporated into one's social network (Giles, 2002). Television viewers think of these characters as a sort of pseudofriend. The early research on parasocial relationships explored the potential link between parasocial relationships with television characters and loneliness. Early research speculated that lonely individuals may use parasocial relationships to compensate for a lack of real-world relationships. However, research in this area has typically not substantiated this link (Chory-Asad & Yanen, 2005; A. M. Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Tsao, 1996). Rather, parasocial relationships appear to be a normal response to mediated characters that merely exist alongside real-world relationships (Giles, 2002).

PARASOCIAL "BREAKUPS"

Because of the similarities between parasocial relationships with television characters and real-life relationships, researchers have begun to examine how television viewers respond to the demise of a parasocial relationship—a parasocial breakup (e.g., Cohen, 2003, 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006). These parasocial breakups have been compared to real-life breakups and appear to affect viewers in similar ways. Cohen (2003) proposed the parasocial breakup concept and validated a scale designed to measure the emotional distress viewers experience when a parasocial relationship is terminated (e.g., "feel lonely," "feel sad," "feel like I lost a close friend"). By asking survey respondents to imagine how they would feel if their favorite character was taken off the air, Cohen (2003) found age differences in anticipated distress. In particular, teens expected greater distress in response to a parasocial breakup than did older adults (Cohen, 2003). More recently, Cohen (2004) found that when individuals imagine the loss of their favorite character, not only do they experience distress, but this emotional distress closely mirrors that of a real breakup. In particular, viewers who report stronger parasocial relationships and those with anxious ambivalent attachment styles anticipate greater breakup distress (Cohen, 2004). Taken together, these studies indicate that parasocial relationships share commonalities with interpersonal relationships not only in their formation and development but also in their dissolution and subsequent outcomes. However, these studies are limited in that they measured anticipated distress in response to a hypothetical breakup rather than actual distress following the real thing.

To overcome this limitation, a more recent study examined distress brought on by the ending of the long-running situation comedy *Friends*

(Eyal & Cohen, 2006). Consistent with the earlier research, viewers who indicated more intense parasocial relationships with one of the main characters reported greater distress following the series finale. Thus, the association between the intensity of a parasocial relationship and breakup distress has been confirmed in both hypothetical and actual circumstances. However, it remains unknown how individuals will react if a character with whom they have a parasocial relationship is suddenly taken off the air for a temporary but extended period. Indeed, one of the central features of the satisfaction of parasocial relationships is their predictability. Horton and Wohl (1956) described the nature of a parasocial interaction as ''a regular and dependable event, to be counted on, planned for, and integrated into the routines of daily life'' (p. 216). The writers' strike created an extended break in these relationships with uncertain length. Based on the extant research, there is reason to believe that this less permanent loss may be similarly distressing to those who report strong parasocial relationships. Therefore we predict the following:

H1: Those who have stronger parasocial relationships with their favorite television character will report more distress when that character's television show is no longer airing new episodes.

The previous research on parasocial breakups has focused on emotional distress as an outcome variable. Although this is one important reaction to a breakup situation, there is much to learn about how viewers react, behaviorally, to these parasocial breakups. For example, following a parasocial breakup, do viewers seek out other forms of media or turn to other activities to fill their leisure time? Moreover, to what extent do viewers seek out interpersonal interaction versus other mediated activities following a parasocial breakup. To begin to explore this question, we advance the following.

RQ1: What activities will viewers seek out when their favorite characters and/or favorite television shows are no longer available?

The previous research on parasocial relationships and breakups has consistently found that female participants experience stronger parasocial relationships than do male participants (e.g., Cohen, 2003; Eyal & Cohen, 2006). However, results are less clear when it comes to gender differences in emotional distress following a parasocial breakup. Cohen (2003) found no difference in male participants' versus female participants' anticipated emotional distress in response to a hypothetical parasocial breakup. He argues that female individuals' stronger parasocial relationships do not

translate to greater breakup distress because female individuals also have more relationships and therefore experience less distress over the loss of a single relationship. In contrast, Eyal and Cohen (2006) found that female participants reported greater distress than male participants following the ending of the situation comedy *Friends*. These divergent findings are difficult to reconcile given the hypothetical nature of the first study and an overrepresentation of female participants in the latter sample. Thus, to sort out these gender differences, we pose the following hypothesis and research question:

H2: Women will report stronger parasocial relationships with their favorite television characters than will men.

RQ2: Will men and women differ in their reports of distress when their favorite television character's show is no longer airing new episodes?

TELEVISION AFFINITY

Past research on parasocial breakup has focused on the close relationships that develop between a viewer and a particular media character. However, some television viewers develop strong attachments not only to their favorite characters but also to television in general. Television affinity refers to the overall importance of television in one's daily life. This general affinity for television is another factor that may influence the amount of distress one experiences when his or her favorite programs are no longer available. Thus, the more important television viewing is to an individual, the more distressed he or she should be when a favorite show is taken away. Building on previous findings with respect to parasocial relationships (Cohen, 2003, 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006), we expect that television affinity will predict greater distress when viewers are faced with a parasocial "breakup" spanning multiple television shows and characters as during the writers' strike. Specifically, individuals for whom television is an important part of their daily life will report more distress when their favorite show is taken away. Thus we predict the following:

H3: Individuals with greater television affinity will experience more distress when their favorite show is no longer airing new episodes.

TELEVISION VIEWING MOTIVATION

Previous research applying the uses and gratifications framework has revealed that individuals choose to watch television to serve different needs

(for review, see A. M. Rubin, 2009). Although numerous taxonomies of television viewing motives exist, one common distinction is between viewing for ritualistic versus instrumental motives. Instrumental viewing motives refer to selecting television content in a way that is goal-directed and active (A. M. Rubin, 1984). Instrumental television viewers are actively involved in the content they select and tend to perceive the content as more realistic (e.g., Perse, 1990; Perse & Rubin, 1988). In contrast, ritualistic viewing motives are characterized by habit. Rather than seeking out particular types of content to serve some particular function, ritualistic viewers choose television in general to serve some function, such as simply passing the time or relaxation. In this case, the specific content that is viewed is less central. Based on these different viewing motivations, we reason that instrumental television viewers will have a difficult time finding a suitable replacement activity if their favorite television show is taken away. Because these individuals use certain television content to fulfill instrumental viewing motives, taking away one's favorite programming should make meeting these needs more difficult. As a result, these instrumental viewers should experience distress following the loss of their favorite programs. In contrast, ritualistic viewing motives would be relatively unaffected by the unavailability of a particular program or group of programs. Television in general was still available during the writers' strike, so this ritualistic viewing would still be possible. Based on these differences, we expect that greater instrumental television viewing motives will be associated with more distress, whereas no such relationship will exist for ritualistic viewing motives. Therefore, we advance the following:

H4: Watching television for instrumental motives will be positively associated with experiencing distress when a favorite television program is no longer available.

To further examine viewing motivations, we also considered the role of viewing for companionship motivations. Viewing for companionship involves selecting television content to help oneself feel less lonely, or as a supplement when there is no one else to talk to. We reasoned that individuals who report watching television for this reason may develop stronger parasocial relationships with their favorite characters as a result. In turn, these stronger parasocial relationships should lead to greater distress when that character is no longer available to fulfill companionship motives. Thus, we expected an indirect relationship between viewing for companionship and breakup distress, mediated by the strength of one's parasocial relationships.

H5: Viewing for companionship motives will predict stronger parasocial relationships with one's favorite character which will in turn predict greater distress when that character's show is temporarily taken off the air.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 403 undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses at a large Midwestern university completed an online questionnaire. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 33 years ($M = 21.14$, $SD = 1.82$). The sample was relatively evenly split by gender (52.9% female), and the majority of participants reported their racial identity as non-Hispanic White (77.7%).

Measures

Participants were first asked to estimate how many hours of television they watch in a typical day ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.71$). The average amount of television viewing within this sample fell within the range of what other recent studies have reported (e.g., Aubrey, 2007, $M = 1.22$; Segrin & Nabi, 2002, $M = 4.25$). Next, students were asked to respond to Rubin and Rubin's (1982) five-item measure of *television affinity* to gauge the overall importance of television in their daily lives. Example items include, ''Watching television is one of the most important things I do each day,'' and ''If the television wasn't working, I would really miss it.'' All items were answered on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale ($M = 2.58$, $SD = .84$, $\alpha = .88$). Principal component factor analysis revealed, as expected, that the five television affinity items represented a single factor (one eigenvalue > 1).

To gauge participants' *motivations for viewing television*, the television viewing motives scale adapted by Rubin (1983) was used. This scale assessed the extent to which individuals watch television for relaxation, companionship, habit, to pass the time, entertainment, social interaction, information, arousal, and escape. Participants were asked to report the extent to which each reason is like their own reason for viewing (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *not much*, 3 = *somewhat*, 4 = *a lot*, 5 = *exactly*). In addition to the nine motivations just listed, this scale was also divided into instrumental and ritualistic motives. Consistent with past research, instrumental viewing was composed of viewing for entertainment, social interaction, information, arousal and escape motivations ($M = 2.95$, $SD = .55$, $\alpha = .76$; Kim & Rubin, 1997). Based on past research, ritualistic viewing was composed of motivations for relaxation, companionship, habit, and passing time ($M = 3.10$, $SD = .60$, $\alpha = .68$; Kim & Rubin, 1997).

Next, participants were asked to estimate how many of the shows they watch regularly were taken off the air because of the strike (1 = *none*, 2 = *a few*, 3 = *about half*, 4 = *most*, 5 = *all*). Most participants reported that at least a few of their programs had been affected ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.08$), but

14.1% of participants ($N = 57$) indicated that none of the shows they normally watch were taken off the air. Participants who gave a response other than "none" were then asked to think about their favorite show when answering the next set of questions. Participants were first asked to type the name of their favorite show. Next, they were asked whether there had been any disruption in new episodes of this show because of the television writers' strike (*Yes* = 53%, *No* = 34%, *Don't know* = 13%).

Those whose favorite programs had been disrupted by the writers' strike ($N = 177$) were asked to respond to a series of question measuring their distress in its absence. The items used to measure *television distress* were adapted from previous measures of parasocial breakup distress (Cohen, 2003; Eyal & Cohen, 2006).[1] A principal components factor analysis revealed that several items from these two scales needed to be removed in order to arrive at a clear, one-dimensional scale (one eigenvalue >1). To that end, items that did not clearly load onto one and only one factor were removed. The resulting scale included seven items. Sample items include, "Now that my favorite television show is off the air, I feel more lonely" and "Now that my favorite television show is off the air, I feel a void in my life." Participants responded on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) ($M = 2.23$, $SD = .66$, $\alpha = .81$).[2]

In the next set of questions, participants were instructed to focus on their favorite television character. Participants were told that this character could be from their favorite television show or from a different show. After indicating their favorite character, participants completed a measure of their parasocial relationship with that character.[3] *Parasocial relationships* were measured with Rubin and Perse's (1987) 10-item scale. The scale was slightly modified to reflect favorite character in general as opposed to favorite soap opera character. Sample items include, "My favorite character makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend" and "I see my favorite character as a natural, down-to-earth person." Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) ($M = 3.41$, $SD = .61$, $\alpha = .83$).

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[1]Scales from Cohen (2003) and Eyal and Cohen (2006) were combined because there were some changes in the most recent article from the original, validated scale. Our scale combined all items from the Cohen (2003) scale plus the two items added by Eyal and Cohen (2006).

[2]Because some participants' favorite shows had already returned and some were still off the air at the time data were collected, participants received questions that were worded slightly differently based on their show's status. For example, those whose favorite shows were still off the air were asked to respond to the statement, "Now that my favorite show is off the air, I feel angry," whereas those whose shows had previously been off the air but had since returned were instead asked to respond to the statement, "When my favorite show was off the air, I felt angry."

[3]More information about the specific programs and characters identified by participants as their favorite can be obtained by contacting the first author.

Participants were then asked whether there had been any disruption in new episodes of the show featuring their favorite character because of the television writers' strike (*Yes* = 46%, *No* = 38%, *Don't know* = 16%). To measure distress among those who had experienced a disruption ($N = 152$), the seven items used to measure TV distress were modified to measure *parasocial breakup distress* (Cohen, 2003; Eyal & Cohen, 2006). These items again resulted in a one-dimensional scale (one eigenvalue > 1). Sample items include, ''Now that my favorite television character is off the air, I feel more lonely'' and ''Now that my favorite television character is off the air, I feel sad.'' Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) ($M = 2.09$, $SD = .66$, $\alpha = .85$).[4]

Participants were also asked a set of questions to discover what types of *activities* they used to fill their leisure time in the absence of their favorite television programming. Participants were presented with a list of 14 activities and asked whether they spend *more, less*, or *the same amount* of time doing each one since the writers' strike. These activities included media activities such as *watching reruns* and *using the Internet* as well as nonmediated activities such as *exercising, studying*, and *talking with friends or family*.

Last, all participants were asked basic demographic information including gender, age, and racial background.

RESULTS

H1 predicted that a stronger parasocial relationship with one's favorite character would predict greater distress during a temporary parasocial breakup. To test H1, a stepwise regression was conducted to examine the predictors of parasocial breakup distress (Table 1). Age and gender were entered on the first step. Television viewing variables were entered on the second step, including the number of regularly viewed programs taken off the air during the strike, hours of television viewing, and television affinity. Parasocial relationship strength was entered on the final step. As expected, the strength of one's parasocial relationship was a significant predictor of parasocial breakup distress ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$). In fact, parasocial relationship strength was the strongest predictor of distress in the regression model. Thus H1 was supported. As shown in Table 1, television affinity was also a significant predictor of breakup distress ($\beta = .19$, $p = .01$).

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[4]Because some participants' favorite characters had already returned and some were still off the air at the time the data were collected, there was slight variation in how questions were worded based on the status of that character's television program.

TABLE 1
Stepwise Regression Model Predicting Parasocial Breakup Distress

Variable	B	SE B	β
Step 1			
Age	.01	.02	.04
Gender	−.04	.10	−.03
Step 2			
Age	.01	.02	.02
Gender	−.09	.10	−.07
No. of shows off the air	.10	.05	.15*
Hours of TV	−.01	.03	−.04
TV affinity	.21	.07	.24*
Step 3			
Age	.02	.02	.05
Gender	−.14	.09	−.11
No. of shows off the air	.07	.05	.10
Hours of TV	−.01	.03	−.03
TV affinity	.17	.07	.19*
Parasocial Relationship	.32	.08	.28*

Note. $R^2 = .003$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .07$ for Step 2 ($p < .05$); $\Delta R^2 = .07$ for Step 3 ($p < .05$).
*$p < .05$.

RQ1 asked what alternative activities individuals would seek out when their favorite programming and/or characters were no longer on the air. Participants were presented with a list of 14 activities and asked whether they spend *more*, *less*, or *the same amount* of time doing each one since the writers' strike. This exploratory analysis revealed two key trends (Table 2). First, participants were most likely to increase their time spent with other media rather than increasing nonmedia activities. Specifically, the activities that were most commonly noted as having increased since the strike were watching reruns on TV (49% of respondents), spending time on the Internet (40.7%), watching movies (31.5%), and listening to music (26.7%). Far fewer participants reported increasing the amount of time they spent on nonmedia activities such as exercise (15.6%) and studying (14.4%), or social activities such as going out (19.6%), spending time with friends and family (18%), or talking with friends or family (12.5%). Second, a number of these activities varied by gender. Specifically, male participants were significantly more likely than female participants to replace their television time with video games or sports. Female participants, on the other hand, were more likely than male participants to increase the amount of time they spent engaging in social activities such as going out with friends. In sum, there is little evidence to support the notion that television viewing displaces social activities and/or interpersonal interaction. Indeed, when television viewers

TABLE 2
Percentage of Participants Who Spent More Time With Each Activity
During the Writers' Strike

Activity	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)	χ^2
Watching reruns	42.5	54.5	49.1	4.67 (2, $N = 326$)
Using the Internet	37.0	43.6	40.7	3.75 (2, $N = 327$)
Watching movies	29.5	33.1	31.5	.54 (2, $N = 327$)
Listening to music	27.6	26.0	26.7	.25 (2, $N = 326$)
Going out*	15.2	23.2	19.6	8.79 (2, $N = 326$)
Spending time with friends or family	17.8	18.2	18	.08 (2, $N = 327$)
Playing video games*	29.5	6.7	16.9	30.24 (2, $N = 326$)
Exercising	16.4	14.9	15.6	.18 (2, $N = 327$)
Reading books	12.3	16.6	14.7	2.62 (2, $N = 327$)
Studying	10.3	17.7	14.4	3.88 (2, $N = 326$)
Read magazines	10.3	16.6	13.8	5.00 (2, $N = 327$)
Talking to friends or family	10.3	14.4	12.5	1.77 (2, $N = 327$)
Playing sports*	17.8	6.1	11.3	11.24 (2, $N = 327$)
Reading newspapers	8.2	7.2	7.6	.62 (2, $N = 327$)

*$p < .05$.

were no longer able to use television to meet their needs they primarily turned to similar (media-based) activities to fill this void.

H2 predicted that women would report stronger parasocial relationships with their favorite television characters than would men. Results of an independent samples t test revealed that women reported stronger parasocial relationships ($M = 3.54$) with their favorite TV characters than did men ($M = 3.27$), $t(270) = -3.98$, $p < .001$. Thus, H2 was supported. RQ2 asked whether men and women would report different levels of parasocial breakup *distress* when new episodes of their favorite character's program were taken away. Results revealed no differences in parasocial distress between men ($M = 2.10$) and women ($M = 2.07$), $t(198) = .34$, $p = .74$. Thus, although women reported stronger parasocial relationships with their favorite characters, this did not translate to gender differences in levels of parasocial breakup distress.

H3 predicted that individuals with greater television affinity would report more distress when their favorite show suddenly stopped airing new episodes. To test H3, a stepwise regression was conducted to examine the predictors of television distress (Table 3). As expected, television affinity was a significant predictor of distress ($\beta = .43$, $p < .001$). Moreover, television affinity was the strongest predictor of overall program-related distress (see Table 3). Thus H3 was supported. As indicated in Table 3, distress was also predicted by amount of daily television viewing ($\beta = -.24$, $p < .01$) and the number of regularly viewed programs disrupted by the strike ($\beta = .22$, $p < .01$). Taken

TABLE 3
Stepwise Regression Model Predicting Television Distress

Variable	B	SE B	β
Step 1			
Age	−.01	.03	−.02
Gender	.07	.11	.05
Step 2			
Age	.00	.03	.00
Gender	.04	.11	.03
No. of shows off the air	.13	.05	.20*
Hours of TV	−.02	.04	−.03
Step 3			
Age	.01	.03	.02
Gender	−.02	.10	−.02
No. of shows off the air	.14	.05	.22*
Hours of TV	−.12	.04	−.24*
TV affinity	.39	.07	.43*

Note. $R^2 = .003$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .04$ for Step 2 ($p < .05$); $\Delta R^2 = .15$ for Step 3 ($p < .05$).
*$p < .05$.

together, these results indicate that participants with a high degree of television affinity and those who were unable to view a number of their favorite programs experienced greater distress. However, those who spent the most time watching television were less likely to experience distress.

H4 predicted that watching television for instrumental motives would be positively associated with distress when a favorite television program is no longer available. As displayed in Table 4, the stepwise regression revealed

TABLE 4
Stepwise Regression Model Predicting Television Distress Based on Instrumental and Ritualistic Viewing Motives

Variable	B	SE B	β
Step 3			
Age	.01	.03	.03
Gender	.07	.10	.05
No. of shows off the air	.11	.05	.16*
Hours of TV	−.03	.04	−.07
Instrumental	.50	.12	.38*
Ritualistic	−.19	.11	−.16

Note. Steps 1 and 2 are not presented here because they are identical to Table 3. $R^2 = .003$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .04$ for Step 2 ($p < .05$); $\Delta R^2 = .09$ for Step 3 ($p < .05$).
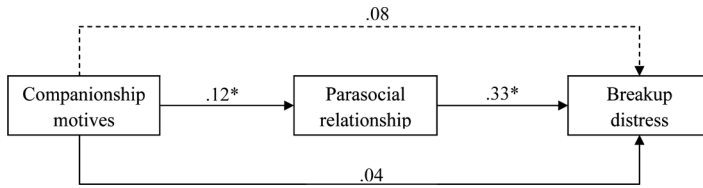*$p < .05$.

FIGURE 1 Indirect relationship between viewing for companionship and parasocial breakup distress. *Note*. A bootstrap estimate of this indirect effect with 5,000 bootstrap samples 95% confidence interval $= .01-.08$. $^*p < .05$.

that instrumental television viewing motives were a significant predictor of distress ($\beta = .38$, $p < .001$). Thus, H4 was supported in that those who select television content for instrumental reasons reported greater distress following the disruption of their favorite television program. We also examined the relationship between ritualistic viewing motives and television distress. Ritualistic viewing motives were negatively related to distress, but this relationship fell short of statistical significance ($\beta = -.16$, $p = .09$). This relationship suggests that the more one views television in a ritualistic way (e.g., to pass time or for relaxation) the less distressed they were when their favorite program was no longer available.

H5 predicted an indirect relationship between viewing for companionship motives and distress following one's favorite character's show being taken off the air. This relationship was expected to be mediated by the strength of the parasocial relationship. H5 was tested using the Preacher and Hayes (2004) macro for testing indirect effects with SPSS (see Figure 1). This analysis revealed a nonsignificant total effect of companionship motives on character distress ($b = .08$, $p = .14$).[5] As expected, viewing for companionship motives was associated with a stronger parasocial relationship with one's favorite character ($b = .12$, $p = .01$) and stronger parasocial relationships were associated with greater breakup distress ($b = .33$, $p < .001$). Moreover, the relationship between companionship motives and character distress was further reduced when examined within this mediated model ($b = .04$, $p = .44$). A bootstrap estimate of this indirect effect was also pursued with 5,000 bootstrap samples (95% confidence interval $= .01-.08$). Because zero is not in the confidence interval, we can conclude that the

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[5]Although some have argued that the total relationship between the independent and dependent variable is a necessary condition for an indirect relationship, such a relationship is indeed not a necessary condition for statistical mediation (Hayes, 2009; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Nevertheless, it is informative to know what direct relationship exists here prior to examining the indirect relationship.

indirect relationship between viewing for companionship motives and breakup distress is significantly different from zero at $p < .05$. These data are consistent with the expected indirect relationship between viewing for companionship motives and character distress. Thus, H5 was supported.

DISCUSSION

Although the permanent dissolution of parasocial relationships has been examined in previous research, little is known about the temporary parasocial ''breaks'' viewers routinely experience. Also, little is known about the behavioral reactions that accompany emotional distress resulting from parasocial breakups. This study examined a widespread disruption in television viewers' favorite shows and characters in the context of the TV writer's strike. Taken together, the findings support and extend previous literature on parasocial relationships, revealing that parasocial breakups need not be permanent in order to lead to emotional distress. Moreover, television affinity is another important predictor of breakup distress. These results further advance this literature by demonstrating that viewing motivations have important implications for breakup distress. Viewers who watch for instrumental motives report greater distress when their favorite television shows are taken away. In particular, those who view television for companionship report greater parasocial relationships, which in turn predicts greater breakup distress.

The finding that stronger parasocial relationships with favorite television characters related to greater levels of breakup distress has now been demonstrated across several contexts including a hypothetical breakup, a real—though permanent and long-anticipated—breakup, and now a temporary breakup characterized by uncertainty surrounding if and when characters would return. The stability of this relationship across these contexts lends support for the notion that parasocial relationships share commonalities with real-life relationships in terms of their formation and dissolution. Thus, this study extends this line of research by revealing that distress can occur even without a permanent loss. This finding is consistent with our growing understanding of the nature of parasocial relationships. As noted previously, one of the central gratifications of parasocial relationships is their predictability and dependability (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The writers' strike created an extended break in these relationships of uncertain length. This finding raises intriguing questions about the role of uncertainty and uncertainty reduction theory in future research on parasocial breakup. In particular, future research should continue to examine the role of predictability and uncertainty management in the context of parasocial relationship formation and dissolution.

This study also reexamined the role of gender in parasocial relationships and breakups. Previous research has consistently found that female participants report stronger parasocial relationships than do male participants. However, the role of gender in distress following parasocial breakups has been unclear (Cohen, 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006). Using a relatively gender-balanced sample, this study revealed that although women reported stronger parasocial relationships than men, there were no gender differences in parasocial breakup distress. Because women reported stronger parasocial relationships, one may expect them to exhibit greater distress than their male counterparts. However, there is reason to believe that women may possess better relationship coping techniques. Indeed, research in an interpersonal context has shown that women report stronger interpersonal relationships while also demonstrating greater ability to cope with their dissolution (Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Helgeson, 1994; Simpson, 1987; Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998). Taken together, this finding resolves previous inconsistencies regarding gender differences in parasocial breakup distress.

To further examine gender differences in coping, we can look to the present results regarding the activities participants turned to during the strike. Overall, participants were most likely to increase time spent with other media, rather than increasing nonmedia activities. This finding suggests that although parasocial relationships are similar to real-world relationships, viewers more frequently replace them with other media exposure. Of course, these data do not reveal the extent to which these media-based activities were solitary or social. That is, other media may have been used alone or with others. Perhaps most interesting, women were more likely than men to report an increase in going out with friends during the writers' strike. This trend may account for why women were no more likely to experience distress than men despite their stronger parasocial relationships with their favorite character. That is, women may have compensated for the temporary dissolution of important parasocial relationships by increasing time spent socializing with real-world friends and family members. Indeed, research has shown that men and women employ different coping techniques when dealing with distress (Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). In particular, women are more likely to seek social support when coping with distress than are men (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

This study also examined the relationship between television affinity and distress from a favorite *show* being taken away. This moves beyond parasocial relationships with individual characters to examine the notion of breakup and distress in a wider context. The fact that individuals who view to fulfill instrumental needs showed greater distress points out an important consideration: Individuals respond differently to a breakup based on how

they use television. The fact that ritualistic viewing was a near significant, negative predictor of distress is not surprising. Individuals who view primarily for ritualistic purposes were not as emotionally affected by the writers' strike because these viewers could still view reruns, reality shows and other types of content that were still available to pass time and relax. In contrast, those who view for instrumental motives appeared to have a much more difficult time finding the specific content to satisfy these needs once their typical fare was no longer available.

This research took advantage of this unplanned event to study how individuals cope with their favorite television characters and shows being taken away for a limited but substantial amount of time. However, because of the time that data were gathered (spring 2008), uncertainty about when shows would return was likely not as extreme as it had been earlier on. Participants may have been aware that their favorite shows would return soon and therefore may have felt less distress than they had earlier. However, some post hoc analyses revealed no difference in the level of distress among those participants whose programs were still off the air ($M = 2.20$, $SD = .67$) and those whose programs had resumed airing new episodes ($M = 2.33$, $SD = .63$), $t(161) = 1.18$, $p = .24$. A similar pattern revealed no difference in parasocial breakup distress depending on whether one's favorite character's program had resumed its normal schedule, $t(198) = .34$, $p = .74$. Thus, although distress may not have been measured when it was strongest, substantial distress was still evidenced here, indicating that parasocial breakups can cause lasting emotional distress. Moreover, the fact that this distress persisted even after participants knew their favorite shows and characters would return soon suggests these findings may indeed generalize to more typical temporary breaks in scheduled programming. Future research should examine how individuals react when a favorite show or character are taken off the air for a regularly scheduled season break. That is, does similar distress arise when there is certainty regarding when the show will return?

Because participants in this study were college students, it is difficult to say how other populations may have reacted to the strike. Indeed, students at a large university may have greater opportunities to seek out replacement activities to gratify their needs. As a result, they may have been less distressed about this disturbance in their viewing routine. Indeed, past research and theorizing in the area of media uses and dependency suggest that individual, social, and structural differences play an important role in how individuals respond to parasocial breakups (e.g., Rubin & Windahl, 1986). For example, those who are less healthy and/or less mobile are typically more dependent on television to fulfill their needs than are healthier individuals (Rubin & Rubin, 1982). We may reasonably expect that these individuals will also respond more severely to a parasocial breakup given

this increased dependence and, perhaps, lack of readily available alternative activities. Thus, future research should continue to examine how different types of individuals react to parasocial breakups.

In sum, this article contributes to the parasocial breakup literature by (a) examining parasocial relationships in a unique context, a real but nonpermanent breakup; (b) looking at the differences in parasocial breakup distress across different television viewing motives; and (c) considering how television affinity can predict distress from a *television breakup*. This research shows that temporary breakups, in addition to imaginary and permanent breakups with television characters, can lead to emotional distress. We also now have clear evidence that men and women experience similar amounts of distress from parasocial breakups despite women's tendency to report stronger relationships. Moreover, we have begun to examine the types of alternative activities viewers turn to when faced with a parasocial breakup and how these activities vary by gender. Finally, this research shows that in addition to considering basic demographic differences when thinking about breakup distress levels, we should consider differences in viewing motives. Overall, this research further reveals the similarities between parasocial and interpersonal relationships—revealing that even temporary breakups can lead to emotional distress and behavior change.

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