

THE PARASOCIAL PARADOX: EXISTENTIAL ISOLATION AND ITS IMPACT ON (PARASOCIAL) RELATIONSHIP FUNCTIONING

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INTRODUCTION

- Existential isolation refers to the subjective feeling that one's inner experiences are fundamentally not understood by others (Pinel et al., 2017).
- Individuals who experience high existential isolation often perceive interpersonal interactions as lacking depth or authenticity, which may lead them to seek alternative sources of connection.
- Parasocial relationships may fulfill this need by creating an illusion of intimacy and understanding with media figures
- Horton and Wohl (1956) originally described parasocial interaction as a face-to-face-like relationship in which audiences feel personally addressed and psychologically connected to media personas. Over time, repeated exposure to a media figure's thoughts, emotions, and personal disclosures can foster perceived intimacy, which resembles the closeness experienced in real interpersonal relationships (Derrick et al., 2009; Tukachinsky, 2011)
- When individuals feel that a media figure shares their personality traits, beliefs, or emotional experiences, they may experience greater psychological closeness and validation. This perceived alignment can help counter existential isolation by fostering the sense that another mind reflects or resonates with one's internal experiences
- Taken together, this literature suggests that stronger parasocial relationships may be negatively correlated with existential isolation

HYPOTHESES

Proof of Concept

- Existential isolation will be negatively correlated with parasocial relationship intensity

Exploratory Moderation

- Parasocial relationship intensity will moderate the relationship between feelings of existential isolation and self-esteem and depression



METHOD

- This study was conducted cross-sectionally and administered as a Qualtrics survey
- Participants were comprised of 38 students from Texas Christian University (preliminary analyses)

Materials

1. Existential Isolation Scale (EIS; Pinel et al., 2017)
 - a. Six items; $\alpha = .83$
 - i. "People do not often share my perspective."
2. Celebrity Attitudes & Worship Scale (Maltby et al., 2006)
 - a. Seventeen items; $\alpha = .87$
 - i. When something bad happens to [MY FAVORITE MEDIA FIGURE] I feel like it happened to me.
3. Perceived Similarity (Cohen, XXX)
 - a. Four items; $\alpha = .79$
 - i. "My favorite media figure thinks like me."
4. Symbolic Social Bond Use (Murray et al., 2025)
 - a. Seven items; $\alpha = .70$
 - i. "Over the past week, how often do you... Go on social media to post, comment, or interact with others."
5. Depression (CES-D; xxx)
 - a. Twenty items; $\alpha = .86$
 - i. "I could not get "going.""
6. Self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965)
 - a. Ten items; $\alpha = .89$
 - i. "All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure."

MODERATION ANALYSES

CONCLUSION

- **Correlation analyses** suggested that existentially isolated individuals feel less strong in their parasocial relationships, suggesting that one-sided media connections may not provide comfort or connection for those who feel fundamentally misunderstood
- However, this also suggests that individuals who have strong parasocial relationships are less likely to feel as though no one understands their subjective experience
- **Moderation analyses** revealed that individuals who are high in existential isolation, when also high in parasocial relationship intensity, have higher levels of depression and lower self-esteem, indicating that parasocial relationships have negative psychological effects on existentially isolated individuals
- Due to the small sample size, the moderation analyses should be examined with caution, and a larger sample size necessary to replicate the results found in this study
- Future research should explore the directionality of the relationship between existential isolation and parasocial relationship strength and the consequent effects of these relations on well-being



CORRELATION ANALYSES

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Existential Isolation	1					
2. Parasocial Relationships	-.47**	1				
3. Perceived Similarity	-.42*	.36	1			
4. Symbolic Social Bonds Use	-.25	.08	.04	1		
5. Depression	.21	-.06	.01	-.22	1	
6. Self-esteem	-.23	-.06	.03	.28	-.72**	1

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level