

A warm TV can drive away feelings of loneliness and rejection

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Not all technology meets human needs, and some technologies provide only the illusion of having met your needs.

But new research by [psychologists](#) at the University at Buffalo and Miami University, Ohio, indicates that illusionary relationships with the characters and personalities on favorite TV shows can provide people with feelings of belonging, even in the face of [low self esteem](#) or after being rejected by friends or family members.

The findings are described in four studies published in the current issue of the [Journal of Experimental Social Psychology](#).

"The research provides evidence for the 'social surrogacy hypothesis,' which holds that humans can use technologies, like television, to provide the experience of belonging when no real belongingness has been experienced," says one of the study's authors, Shira Gabriel, Ph.D., UB assistant professor of psychology.

"We also argue that other commonplace technologies such as movies, music or interactive video games, as well as television, can fulfill this need."

Shira's co-authors are Jaye L. Derrick, Ph.D., postdoctoral associate and adjunct instructor of psychology at UB, and Kurt Hugenberg, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychology at Miami University.

The first study, of 701 undergraduate students, used the Loneliness Activities Scale and the Likelihood of Feeling Lonely Scale to find that subjects reported tuning to favored television programs when they felt lonely and felt less lonely when viewing those programs.

Study 2 used essays to experimentally manipulate the belongingness needs of 102 undergraduate subjects and assess the importance of their favored television programs when those needs were stimulated.

Participants whose belongingness needs were aroused revealed longer in their descriptions of favored television programs than in descriptions of non-favored programs, the study found.

Study 3 of 116 participants employed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule and an eight-item measure of feelings of rejection to find that thinking about favored television programs buffered subjects against drops in self-esteem, increases in negative mood and feelings of rejection commonly elicited by threats to close relationships.

Study 4 asked 222 participants to write a 10-minute essay about their favorite television program, and then to write about programs they watch "when nothing else is on," or about experiencing an academic achievement. They were then asked to verbally describe what they had written in as much detail as possible.

After writing about favored television programs, the subjects verbally expressed fewer feelings of loneliness or exclusion than when verbally describing either of the two control situations (essays about programs watched when nothing else is on, academic achievement). This is evidence, say the researchers, that illusory or "parasocial" relationships with television characters or personalities can ease belongingness needs.

It remains an open question, say the researchers, whether social surrogacy suppresses belongingness needs or actually fulfills them, and they acknowledge that the kind of social surrogacy provoked by these programs can be a poor substitution for "real" human-to-human experience.

"Turning one's back on family and friends for the solace of television may be maladaptive and leave a person with fewer resources over time," says UB's Derrick, "but for those who have difficulty experiencing social interaction because of physical or environmental constraints, technologically induced belongingness may offer comfort."

Source: University at Buffalo ([news](#) : [web](#))

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