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Farewell on screen: Uncertainty in parasocial relationships and breakups with fictional media characters^{☆,☆☆}

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ABSTRACT

Viewers form enduring bonds, or parasocial relationships (PSRs), with media characters. They suffer breakup distress when such relationships are dissolved and show emotional reactions similar to those from the dissolution of social relationships. Alongside definite and temporary breakups, this paper introduces the term *uncertain breakup*, and the three breakup types are analyzed and compared. In a two-survey study with viewers of five shows (*Emily in Paris*, *Bridgerton*, *Peaky Blinders*, *Shadow and Bone*, *Never Have I Ever*), the three parasocial breakup types were analyzed in Study I with independent samples and with dependent samples in Study II, which also considered the behavioral effects of parasocial breakups. The results show that PSRs positively predict viewers' temporary, uncertain, and definite breakup distress and subsequent PSRs after a breakup. The three types of breakup distress differ regarding, for example, their moderation of viewers' level of loneliness or their behavioral effects. The results' implications are discussed for future research on PSRs and their dissolution.

Media characters are often the focus of entertainment media or media productions in general (Klimmt et al., 2006). How viewers respond to them and process parasocial encounters is a crucial concept of media research (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). Through media exposure, viewers can form enduring bonds with media characters, called parasocial relationships (PSRs), which have characteristics similar to interpersonal relationships (Tukachinsky et al., 2020) regarding, for example, sociability, sympathy, and intimacy (Gleich, 1996). PSRs can outlast and develop beyond media exposure (Klimmt et al., 2006) and have positive effects on viewers by increasing their feeling of belonging (Rosaen & Dibble, 2016) or self-esteem (Brown et al., 2015). As with social relationships, PSR can be dissolved, adversely affecting viewers (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). *Parasocial breakups* (PSBs) can result in emotional reactions similar to that from the dissolution of a social friendship. These negative emotional reactions, called *PSB distress*, leave viewers feeling angry, sad, or lonely (Cohen, 2004). While PSR is an often-examined construct in media research (for an overview, see Liebers & Schramm, 2017; Schramm et al., 2022), findings on PSBs are limited. In a systematic inventory of 60 years of parasociality research, only 1 % of the analyzed articles focused on PSBs (Liebers & Schramm, 2019).

The literature on PSBs differentiates *definite* and *temporary* breakups (see, for an overview; Hu, 2023). A definite PSB describes a breakup between audience members and a media character that is final (Cohen, 2004). They can happen, for example, when the show ends or the character dies or is taken off the show (Cohen, 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006), and viewers no longer engage with the character in new content. *Temporary* breakups happen when no new episodes are released for a period of time but viewers know that the

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character will return. During a writers' strike, a study showed that even this temporary breakup from a character can result in emotional suffering for viewers (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). Thus, viewers suffer emotionally from temporary and definite PSBs with characters.

This paper introduces a third type of PSB that stems from the changes in media-usage habits and viewers' new online streaming opportunities. Definite and temporary PSBs with fictional characters were often analyzed in the context of linear television with strict schedules, when viewers' parasocial encounters depended on programming (e.g., Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). Streaming platforms now often release entire seasons at once (Granow et al., 2018), enabling viewers to parasocially engage with media characters anytime, for as long as they want, and from anywhere. A new type of PSB emerged with this shift in autonomy from TV stations to the audience. *Uncertain* breakups describe how, after the release of the last episode, it is unclear if and when there will be new episodes with the media character. Viewers can consume the new episodes in the rhythm they want but must then endure uncertainty if and when their PSR can develop further.

This paper analyzes PSRs and PSB distress in a natural viewing environment according to current media usage on streaming platforms, with their relationship investigated through two studies of popular shows. It expands existing PSB research, where often only one specific type of PSB was analyzed, and includes a third type, uncertain breakups. By analyzing all three breakup types in one study, this paper contributes to the literature by comparing each of their effects. In Study II, the analysis is done with dependent samples to investigate the development of PSR and PSB distress over time.

1. Parasocial relationships with and breakups from media characters

Viewers can develop relationships with media characters through mediated encounters, which are defined as PSRs and often compared to social relationships (Gleich, 1996; Tukachinsky, 2011). Social relationships can be dissolved, as can PSRs (Cohen, 2003). There is much research on the consequences of the dissolution of social relationships; for example, such dissolution was shown to cause emotional reactions that led people to seek psychological assistance (McCarthy et al., 1997). Other studies analyzed if breakups are harder for certain people, such as those with a strong need for approval (Barbara & Dion, 2000). In this vein, the consequences of PSBs have been analyzed, revealing that viewers show emotional reactions to a breakup with a media character that are similar to a breakup with a real friend (Cohen, 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

There are several causes of PSBs, including a character being axed, the show ending, or viewers deciding to stop watching (see, for an overview; Hu, 2023). In one line of research, researchers analyzed breakups forced upon the viewers. For example, they compared PSBs with real-life breakups, with viewers shown to feel closely the same emotional distress when imagining the loss of their favorite media character as they would for a social breakup (Cohen, 2004). For PSB distress, analyzed following the last episode of the comedy show *Friends*, viewers with stronger PSRs suffered more emotionally from the breakup than those with weaker PSRs (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). The same effect was found for other breakups forced upon the viewers through programming or the show's end (e.g., Bingaman, 2022; Bond & Calvert, 2014; Ellithorpe & Brookes, 2018; Krakowiak, 2022).

Besides the PSBs forced upon viewers by a show, a PSB can also result when viewers decide to stop watching a show, for example, due to an actor's transgression (Hu, 2016; Hu et al., 2018) or to personal growth (Hu, 2023). In two studies, participants were confronted with a manipulated news story about a transgression or scandal concerning an actor. Viewers with stronger PSRs reported stronger PSB distress when the breakup was caused by a scandal concerning the character (Hu, 2016) or the actor's transgression (Hu et al., 2018). It is important to note that a breakup with a liked character is only one of several possible coping mechanisms after an actor's transgression, and if viewers want to avoid these negative emotions of a PSB distress, they can employ other coping strategies (Tukachinsky & Downey, 2023). One example of personal growth resulting in PSBs is the transition from early childhood to a new stage of life. A study showed that children experienced PSB distress after outgrowing children's television shows such as *Sesame Street* (Bond & Calvert, 2014). For PSBs resulting from viewers' decisions—either through personal growth or due to an actor's transgression—viewers with strong PSRs to a character suffer more from PSBs.

Taken together, several studies have shown that viewers with stronger PSRs report stronger PSB distress in different situations, such as temporary and definite breakups, forced breakups, or those chosen by viewers (see, for an overview; Hu, 2023). This paper aims to re-test this relationship for the three types of PSBs.

H1: Viewers with stronger PSRs report stronger PSB distress.

In early research on PSRs, it was often assumed that lonely people compensate for their lack of social relationships through PSRs (e.g., Rosengren & Windahl, 1971; Rubin et al., 1985). The mixed results then led to the assumption that PSRs are no less meaningful replacements for social relationships. They are rather seen as part of a viewer's social life and often comparable to social relationships (Klimmt et al., 2006). For example, characteristics important in social relationships, such as empathy (Cummins & Cui, 2014) or attachment style (MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2023), have been shown to be important in PSRs. This idea of personality traits characteristic of social compensation being meaningful in PSRs was taken up for PSBs. It could be that while loneliness does not directly influence viewer PSRs, loneliness could contribute to the distress viewers feel during a PSB insofar that lonely viewers suffer more from PSB than less lonely viewers. This assumption was tested in studies about PSB. For example, Eyal and Cohen (2006) showed that lonely viewers suffered more from a PSB, regardless of the strength of their PSRs. The authors assumed that loneliness was more relevant for the dissolution than for building and developing PSRs (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). This relationship is re-analyzed in Hypothesis 2.

H2: The relationship in H1 is moderated through viewers' level of loneliness. The lonelier viewers are, the stronger is the relationship between PSR and PSB distress.

2. Temporary, uncertain, and definite parasocial breakups

In this paper, three types of PSBs are analyzed. Definite PSBs describe a final breakup situation with no chance for viewers to rekindle the relationship with the media character (Cohen, 2004). When individuals deny this definitiveness, they can pretend that the breakup is temporary to avoid the negative feelings (Daniel & Westerman, 2017). Temporary PSBs describe a fleeting state; viewers endure a temporary breakup before rekindling their relationship. Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011) first analyzed this PSB after a writer's strike had occurred and no new episodes had aired for many shows. Their results showed that viewers, who already knew that their favorite characters would return to the screen, and some already had, still suffered emotionally. In their additional analyses, they already considered the difference between what is introduced in this paper as uncertain PSBs and temporary PSBs. Lather and Moyer-Guse differentiated between viewers whose programs were still off the air without knowledge about the future development (uncertain PSBs), and viewers whose programs had resumed airing new episodes at the time of data collection. However, the additional analyses showed no differences between viewers experiencing temporary and uncertain PSBs (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011).

The prevalence of temporary breakups has strongly increased in the current media environment and resulted in the prevalence of uncertain PSBs. In linear television, temporary breakups occur during special or seasonal programming (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). Due to technological changes and the rise of streaming platforms releasing entire seasons at once (Granow et al., 2018), temporary breakups are prevalent. When the last episode of a season airs, it is often unclear whether a new season will be produced, as it depends on viewing rates or other success factors. During this time, viewers endure uncertainty about their PSRs. Uncertain PSBs describe the situation of viewers who have consumed all media content with the character available and do not know if and when new content will be produced and released. During uncertain PSBs, viewers experience uncertainty over their PSRs. Uncertain breakups can result in definite breakups when a show is taken off the air, or viewers can rekindle their PSRs when a new season is released. However, the state of uncertain PSBs is characterized by uncertainty over the future of viewers' PSRs with the character.



Fig. 1. Overview of the procedure of Study I (independent samples).

3. Uncertainty in parasocial breakups

Uncertainty takes an important role in social relationships, thus, should also be considered in the mediated context. Its importance can be illustrated with research on social breakups and the role of predictability in the mediated context. An essential characteristic of PSRs is their predictability and dependability. They make media characters attractive as parasocial friends (Hartmann et al., 2016; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial friends benefit from their regular and reliable appearance, compared to more unreliable and possibly multi-layered social friends (Hartmann et al., 2016). The three types of breakups differ in their level of predictability. Temporary breakups are a situational state, and it is certain that the character will return. There is no uncertainty in a definite breakup; viewers know there will be no new content with the media character in that setting—unless they are in denial (Daniel & Westerman, 2017).

Uncertain breakups differ, as viewers have to endure uncertainty over their PSRs without knowing the outcome of their relationship. This uncertainty is what reduces the attractiveness of the characters as parasocial friends, as it withdraws their predictability (Hartmann et al., 2016). In the social context, uncertainty is the ability of an individual to understand and predict another person's behavior. Following the uncertainty reduction theory, individuals always strive to reduce uncertainty in relationships with others (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Thus, relationship uncertainty is an important construct when analyzing individuals' relationships. It was shown to be essential in different stages of relationships, ranging from the getting-to-know phase to the dissolution of a relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). When individuals endure uncertainty in their social friendships, it often results in negative feelings (Dainton, 2003; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002). As research on social friendships underlines the importance of considering uncertainty in relationship development, it is worthwhile to consider this uncertainty also in mediated friendships. The differentiation of uncertain from definite and temporary PSBs is a first step in doing so.

Thus, the overarching research question of this paper is the comparison of the three types of PSBs and, with that, the effect of the different levels of uncertainty on viewers' breakup distress:

RQ1: How do parasocial relationships, parasocial breakup distress, and the relationship between them differ for temporary, uncertain, and definite breakups?

4. Study I

4.1. Method of study I

4.1.1. Research design and procedure

Quantitative online surveys were conducted with independent samples for three different entertainment shows selected for their popularity, different genres, the existence of already at least one season and the release date of a new season between December 2021 and June 2022. Based on these criteria, the choices were *Emily in Paris* (2nd season, December 2021), *Bridgerton* (2nd season, March 2022), and *Peaky Blinders* (6th season, June 2022).

For each show, two surveys were assessed (see Fig. 1). The data collection for the first survey ran 8–6 weeks before the release of the new season. For these two weeks, participants who had watched the shows' previous seasons were recruited through the snowballing system and social media fan pages. This first survey assessed participants' existing PSRs with a chosen media character (Emily, Lady Whistledown, and Thomas Shelby), their PSB distress, loneliness, and sociodemographics. This survey measured temporary PSB distress, as the participants had watched the previous season and knew about the soon-release of new episodes.

After the release of the new seasons of the shows, during the next six weeks, viewers who had watched them were recruited and could participate in the second survey. The same constructs as in the first survey were assessed. For *Emily in Paris* and *Bridgerton*, uncertain PSB distress was evaluated, as after the release of the season, it was not known if a next season would be produced. Data collection was stopped when the producers announced the next season. To ensure that the participants knew about the uncertainty of the show's future, they were informed about it in the survey before answering the questions about their PSR and PSB distress. For *Peaky Blinders*, definite PSB was assessed, as it was already known that it would be the final season. Again, participants were informed that it

Table 1
Overview of the descriptive statistics and scale reliabilities for study I.

	loneliness			parasocial relationships			parasocial breakup distress		
	M	SD	α	M	SD	α	M	SD	α
Emily in Paris									
pre release	1.88	.77	.91	2.64	1.04	.92	1.95	.82	.81
post release	2.31	.77	.88	2.58	1.04	.92	2.26	.92	.83
Bridgerton									
pre release	1.94	.79	.91	2.55	.86	.88	1.50	.53	.79
post release	1.43	.48	.84	2.48	1.17	.95	1.71	.94	.90
Peaky Blinders									
pre release	1.70	.64	.85	2.81	.94	.85	1.72	.88	.89
post release	2.07	.89	.92	2.67	1.1	.90	2.02	.92	.82

Note. α = Cronbach's Alpha. Mean indices, constructs measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

was the final season to ensure they were aware of the definitiveness of their PSB.

4.2. Measures

All items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (“do not agree at all”) to 5 (“fully agree”), which is available on OSF. Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach’s alpha values are represented in [Table 1](#).

4.3. Loneliness

Participants’ level of loneliness ([Russell et al., 1980](#)) was assessed with 10 items of the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (e.g., “There is no one I can turn to”).

4.4. Parasocial relationships

The intensity of participants’ PSRs was assessed in both surveys with eight items (e.g., “Sometimes, I wish I knew what Emily would do in my situation”) from the parasocial friendship scale ([Tukachinsky, 2011](#)).

4.5. Parasocial breakup distress

Participants’ PSB distress was measured in both surveys with seven items (e.g., “Now that the season with Emily is over, I feel like I lost a good friend”) of the PSB distress scale ([Eyal & Cohen, 2006](#)). The PSB distress for temporary breakup was assessed for all three shows in the first survey, as they were conducted during a break between two seasons, where participants were aware that a new season would be released. Uncertain PSB distress was assessed with the second survey for *Emily in Paris* and *Bridgerton*, as at the time of data collection, it was unclear if and when a next season would be produced. Participants were additionally made aware of this uncertainty at the beginning of the survey. Definite PSB distress was assessed with the second survey for the viewers of *Peaky Blinders*, as they had finished watching the final season at the time of data collection. At the beginning of the survey, they were informed that this was the final season.

4.6. Participants

4.6.1. *Emily in Paris*

The first survey sample consisted of 71 participants aged 18–51 years ($M = 26.36$, $SD=7.21$), 82 % of whom identified as female. The second consisted of 37 participants aged 18–55 years ($M = 30.16$, $SD=10.89$), 72 % of whom identified as female. Based on viewing statistics, they closely represented the show’s audience ([Nielsen Panel, 2022](#)). Nineteen days after the second season’s release, Netflix announced that third and fourth seasons would be produced. Data collection stopped earlier than planned because it was no longer an uncertain breakup, resulting in a relatively small second sample.

4.6.2. *Bridgerton*

The first survey sample was of 97 participants aged 18–58 years ($M = 26.42$, $SD=9.28$), of whom 87 % identified as female. The second consisted of 42 participants aged 19–54 years ($M = 27.11$, $SD=9.29$); again, 87 % identified as female. The gender imbalance in

Table 2

Influence of parasocial relationships and loneliness on breakup distress.

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95 % <i>CI</i>
temporary breakup distress^a					
parasocial relationships	.20	.12	1.76	.080	[−0.025, 0.434]
loneliness	−0.14	.16	−0.90	.37	[−0.455, 0.169]
interaction effect	.11	.05	2.02	.044	[0.003, 0.215]
low loneliness*PSR	.32	.07	4.91	<0.001	[0.194, 0.455]
medium loneliness*PSR	.38	.05	7.52	<0.001	[0.280, 0.478]
high loneliness*PSR	.50	.06	8.37	<0.001	[0.380, 0.614]
uncertain breakup distress^b					
parasocial relationships	.50	.21	2.35	.022	[0.074, 0.919]
loneliness	.06	.32	.19	.851	[−0.579, 0.700]
interaction effect	−0.02	.10	−0.16	.873	[0.253, 1.056]
definite breakup distress^c					
parasocial relationships	.29	.17	1.75	.083	[−0.039, 0.626]
loneliness	.08	.22	.38	.709	[−0.356, 0.521]
interaction effect	.05	.07	.77	.444	[−0.083, 0.187]

Note. Interaction effect: PSR and loneliness. Conditional effects are only indicated when significant. ^a $R^2 = 0.33$ ($p < .001$); $n = 244$. ^b $R^2 = 0.50$ ($p < 0.001$); $n = 64$. ^c $R^2 = 0.36$ ($p < 0.001$); $n = 92$. As the samples of the studies differed, the show was entered as a control variable for temporary and uncertain breakups.

the sample represented the show’s audience (Mitovich, 2022). When third and fourth seasons were confirmed 19 days after the season’s release, data collection stopped, resulting in a relatively small sample.

4.6.3. *Peaky blinders*

The first survey sample consisted of 97 participants aged 18–58 years ($M = 24.76, SD=8.88$), of whom 46 % identified as female. The second consisted of 99 participants aged 18–64 years ($M = 30.44, SD = 12.20$), 47 % of whom identified as female.

4.7. *Data preparation*

The three datasets were cumulated for the analysis. The data from the first survey were used to analyze temporary breakups for all three shows. For *Emily in Paris* and *Bridgerton*, uncertain breakup was analyzed after the season’s release. A definite breakup was analyzed with the second survey for *Peaky Blinders*. To control for the show’s influence, the show was added as a control variable.

5. **Results of study I**

The results showed that stronger PSRs led to stronger temporary ($\beta = 0.45, SD = 0.04, p < .001, F(2,262) = 58.00, R^2 = .30$), uncertain ($\beta = 0.46, SD = 0.08, p < .001, F(2,74) = 29.22, R^2=.43$), and definite breakup distress ($\beta = 0.47, SD = 0.07, p < .001, F(1,96) = 44.53, R^2=.31$). For all three types of breakups, stronger PSRs were a positive predictor for PSB distress, showing no differences between the types of PSBs (H1 confirmed).

To analyze H2, loneliness was introduced as a moderator between PSR and PSB distress (Table 2). For temporary breakups, loneliness moderated the relationship between PSRs and PSB distress. Lonely viewers had the strongest relationship between PSR and PSB distress ($\beta = 0.50, SD = 0.06, p < .001$), followed by medium ($\beta = 0.38, SD = 0.05, p < .001$) and not lonely individuals ($\beta = 0.32, SD = 0.06, p < .001$). No interaction effect with loneliness was found for PSR and uncertain ($\beta = -0.02, SD = 0.10, p = .873$) or definite PSB distress ($\beta = 0.05, SD = 0.07, p = .444$). When considering viewers’ loneliness, the direct effect of PSRs on PSB distress was no longer significant for temporary ($\beta = 0.20, SD = 0.12, p = .080$) and definite PSBs ($\beta = 0.29, SD = 0.17, p = .083$). As loneliness only moderated the relationship between PSR and PSB distress for temporary breakups, H2 was partially confirmed.

Independent *t*-tests were calculated to compare the three types of PSB distress (RQ1; Table 3). There were no significant differences in the strength of PSR between temporary and uncertain or definite breakups. No differences in PSB distress were shown between temporary and uncertain breakups. For *Peaky Blinders*, a temporary breakup could be compared to a definite breakup. The viewers’ breakup distress was significantly higher after the definite ($M = 2.02, SD = 0.92, p = .019$) than during the temporary breakup ($M = 1.72, SD = 0.88$).

6. **Discussion and limitations of study I**

Technological changes, such as the release of whole seasons on streaming platforms, have caused viewers’ consumption of television shows to change considerably (Granow et al., 2018; Jenner, 2014). With that, the prevalence of temporary PSBs has increased. PSBs can lead to emotional distress for viewers, even if they know the breakup is only temporary (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). Study I extended the idea of temporary PSB distress by analyzing them with respect to the current media environment. Additionally, the term uncertain breakup was introduced to describe breakup situations in which it is unclear if the show with the character will return.

From three popular television shows covering different genres, PSRs increased the distress viewers experienced when there were temporary, uncertain, and definite breakups. This is in line with the results of studies analyzing the influence of PSR on PSB distress in definite (e.g., Cohen, 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006) and temporary situations (e.g., Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). This relationship is moderated through loneliness for temporary but not for uncertain and definite breakups. In another study, this influence was shown for definite breakups after the release of the final season (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). However, there were some differences in the study designs.

Table 3
Comparison of strength in parasocial relationships and breakup distress after different types of breakups.

	type of breakup								
	<i>M</i>	temporary <i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	uncertain ^a /definite ^b <i>n</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Emily in Paris^a									
parasocial relationships	2.64	1.04	71	2.58	1.04	37	.751	.32	106
breakup distress	1.95	.82	71	2.26	.92	37	.077	-1.79	105
Bridgerton^a									
parasocial relationships	2.55	.86	97	2.27	.95	42	.083	1.74	137
breakup distress	1.50	.54	97	1.53	.68	42	.800	-0.25	136
Peaky Blinders^b									
parasocial relationships	2.81	.94	97	2.67	1.10	99	.349	.94	194
breakup distress	1.72	.88	97	2.02	.92	99	.019	-2.37	193

Note. ^aComparison between temporary and uncertain.
^btemporary and definite breakup. T-tests for independent samples.

In the Study I presented in this paper, participants were all asked about the same character, probably leading to more variance in PSR than in the study of Eyal and Cohen, in which participants could freely choose their favorite *Friends* character. Additionally, in Study I, participants had to watch the entire final season to participate. The results of both studies, Eyal and Cohen (2006) and Study I in this paper, underline the importance of loneliness in the relationship between PSR and PSB distress. Possibly, lonely people do not have stronger PSRs or more parasocial friends (e.g., Rosaen & Dibble, 2016; Tukachinsky et al., 2020), but the findings indicate they suffer more emotionally if a PSR is dissolved. More studies are needed to analyze the PSB type's role in this relationship.

When comparing PSRs and breakup distress before and after the release of a new season, there were no differences between temporary and uncertain breakups. In a definite breakup, the breakup distress was significantly higher than after a temporary breakup. Still, the level of emotional distress was relatively low ($M = 2.02$ on a five-point Likert scale), which is in line with the results of another study, which showed that viewers react to PSBs in a similar way to the dissolution of a social friendship, albeit with a weaker intensity (Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

Several factors limit the results of Study I, the first concerning the samples. The numbers differed considerably, and there was gender imbalance due to the shows chosen. Because of Netflix's announcements concerning the following seasons' production, data collection twice had to be stopped earlier than planned. This was a risk of Study I's design allowing the analysis of PSRs and PSBs in a natural environment without artificially creating a breakup situation. No individual development over time could be analyzed, as the samples were independent. Second, the relationship between PSR and PSB distress was analyzed for three shows representing different genres, and the results cannot be generalized. Third, only affective effects were analyzed for viewers' breakup distress. An analysis in 2011 showed that viewers engage in other media tasks, such as watching reruns on TV and movies or spending time on the Internet, during a PSB (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). In the current media environment, it is much easier to watch reruns on streaming platforms. Also, the variety of content available may influence subsequent activities, making their reanalysis seem promising.

To overcome some of the limitations, a second study was conducted as Study II. The same hypotheses and RQs were tested and expanded. The influence of viewers' PSRs measured before the new seasons' release was assessed on their subsequent PSB distress (H1), considering viewers' state of loneliness (H2). With dependent samples, individuals' development of PSRs and PSB distress over time could be analyzed. H3 assumed that viewers' strength of PSR before a breakup increases PSB distress, which reduces PSR at the second time point. Adapted to current possibilities in media consumption, RQ2 exploratorily analyzes: What are viewers' behavioral reactions to PSBs, and how do they differ for the three types of PSBs?

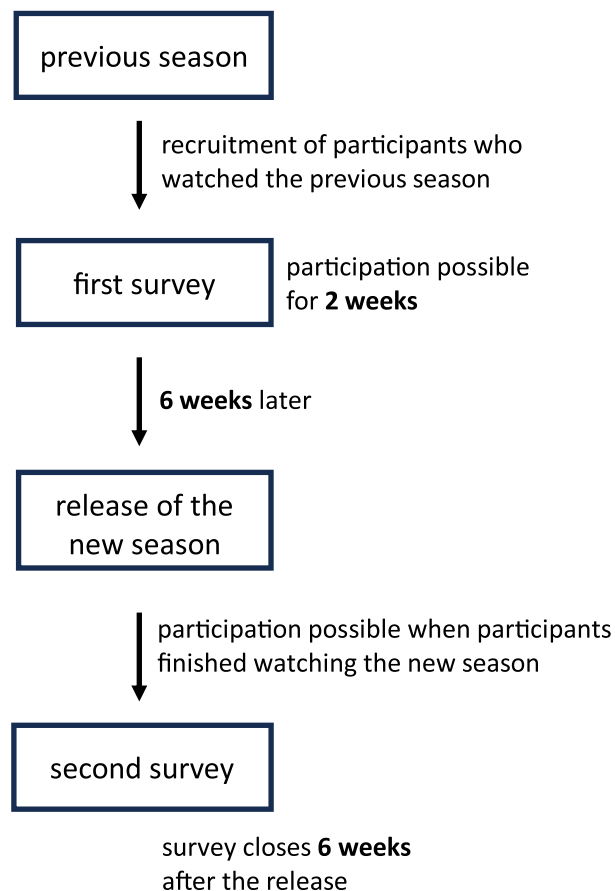


Fig. 2. Overview of the procedure of Study II (dependent samples).

7. Study II

7.1. Method of study II

7.1.1. Research design and procedure

The second study used the same design as Study I but with dependent samples (see Fig. 2). For Study II, again, three shows were chosen: *Emily in Paris* (3rd season, December 2023) to analyze temporary breakups, *Shadow and Bone* (2nd season, March 2023) for uncertain breakups, and *Never Have I Ever* (4th and final season, June 2023) to analyze definite breakups. Participants were recruited on a panel platform. Only those individuals who had watched the shows' previous seasons were eligible. Participants received a small monetary incentive (1st survey: £1.05, 2nd survey: £1.00). The same surveys as in Study I were assessed, and for each show, 200 English-speaking participants (gender-balanced) were recruited. After the release of the new season, participation in the second survey was possible only for the participants of the first sample who have watched the entire new season. Participation in the second survey was possible until six weeks after the new season's release. Study II was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

7.2. Measures

The same measures were employed as in Study I for viewers' loneliness (Russell et al., 1980), PSRs (Tukachinsky, 2011), and PSB distress (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). For means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alpha values, see Table 4.

7.2.1. Alternative activities

Participants were asked to indicate the activities they used to fill the time after finishing the new seasons, following the idea of Lather and Moyer-Gusé (2011). The activities were adapted to current media use possibilities, including re-watching old episodes of the same show.

7.3. Participants

7.3.1. Emily in Paris

The first survey sample was of 200 participants aged 18–74 years ($M = 36.12$, $SD = 12.33$), of whom 144 participants aged 19–74 years ($M = 37.10$, $SD = 12.53$) participated in the second survey. Both samples were gender-balanced.

7.3.2. Shadow and bone

The first survey sample was of 200 participants aged 19–79 years ($M = 34.41$, $SD = 11.59$), of whom 96 aged 20–74 years participated in the second ($M = 33.53$, $SD = 10.86$), with 47 % identifying as female.

7.3.3. Never have I ever

The first sample was of 200 participants aged 20–86 years ($M = 37.86$, $SD = 13.16$), of whom 142 aged 20–86 years participated in the second ($M = 37.86$, $SD = 12.88$), with 52 % identifying as female.

7.3.4. Results of study II

Study II analyzed viewers' temporary, uncertain, and definite PSB distress after the new seasons' releases with dependent samples. Viewers' temporary breakups were analyzed for *Emily in Paris*, uncertain breakups for *Shadow and Bone*, and definite breakups for *Never Have I Ever*. The analyses for H1–H3 are presented for each type of breakup, then the results for the three types of breakups are compared (RQ1), and viewers' behavioral reactions to PSBs are explored (RQ2). To analyze H1, viewers' PSRs from the first survey provided the independent variable, and their PSB distress indicated in the second, after the new season's release, was the dependent variable. For H2, viewers' loneliness was added as a moderator. To analyze H3, viewers' PSRs from the first survey provided the independent variable, their PSB distress after the new season's release the mediator, and their PSRs after the release the dependent

Table 4

Overview of the descriptive statistics and scale reliabilities for study II.

	loneliness			parasocial relationships			parasocial breakup distress		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
Emily in Paris									
pre release	2.18	.96	.94	3.03	.95	.92	2.12	.80	.81
post release	2.12	.96	.94	2.96	1.01	.93	2.08	.80	.83
Shadow and Bone									
pre release	2.37	.96	.93	3.03	.87	.89	2.29	.70	.83
post release	2.30	.94	.92	3.19	.95	.90	2.25	.83	.89
Never Have I Ever									
pre release	2.19	.87	.91	3.03	.90	.89	2.30	.92	.86
post release	2.09	.90	.92	3.12	.95	.92	2.22	.85	.81

Note. α = Cronbach's Alpha. Mean indices, constructs measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

variable. To answer RQ1, *t*-tests for dependent samples were calculated to compare viewers' PSRs and PSB distress. For RQ2, the activities viewers indicated engaging in after the breakup were explored.

7.3.5. Temporary breakups

With the *Emily in Paris* sample, analysis began at the beginning of the temporary breakup, as they had completed the survey after finishing the new season. Table 5 shows that stronger PSRs led to more temporary PSB distress ($\beta = 0.44$, $SD = 0.07$, $p < .001$; H1 confirmed). When loneliness was introduced as a moderator, PSRs still increased viewers' PSB distress ($\beta = 0.43$, $SD = 0.15$, $p = .005$). There was no direct effect of loneliness on PSB ($\beta = 0.09$, $SD = 0.20$, $p = .671$) and no interaction effect between PSRs and loneliness ($\beta = 0.00$, $SD = 0.07$, $p = .965$; H2 rejected).

A mediation model was calculated to test the development of PSRs before and during the temporary breakup (Table 6). The results showed that stronger PSRs before the release of the new season led to stronger PSB distress after the release ($\beta = 0.44$, $SD = 0.07$, $p < .001$) and stronger PSRs ($\beta = 0.68$, $SD = 0.06$, $p < .001$). The temporary PSB influenced viewers' subsequent PSRs ($\beta = 0.39$, $SD = 0.07$, $p < .001$; H3 partially supported), as PSB distress increased subsequent PSRs instead of decreasing them. With 66 % of the variance in PSR intensity after the temporary breakup, explained through PSRs before the release and the temporary PSB distress experienced, a vast amount could be explained.

7.3.6. Uncertain breakups

The same hypotheses were tested with the *Shadow and Bone* sample for uncertain breakups (Table 5). When testing the direct effect of PSR on PSB distress, viewers with stronger PSRs reported more PSB distress during an uncertain breakup than those with weaker PSRs ($\beta = 0.24$, $SD = 0.11$, $p = .038$; H1 confirmed). In the second step, loneliness was introduced as a moderator and the direct effect of PSRs on PSB distress disappeared ($\beta = 0.62$, $SD = 0.32$, $p = .055$). However, the sample was relatively small, and the effect, with a *p*-value of 0.055, was close to the threshold for significant results. There was neither a direct effect of loneliness on PSB distress ($\beta = 0.67$, $SD = 0.43$, $p = .120$) nor an interaction effect between PSRs and loneliness ($\beta = -0.17$, $SD = 0.13$, $p = .198$; H2 rejected).

In Table 6, the development of PSRs before and during the uncertain breakup shows that stronger PSRs led to stronger uncertain PSB distress ($\beta = 0.24$, $SD = 0.11$, $p = .038$) and stronger PSRs during the uncertain breakup ($\beta = 0.40$, $SD = 0.10$, $p < .001$). The intensity of uncertain PSB distress positively influenced subsequent PSRs ($\beta = 0.43$, $SD = 0.09$, $p < .001$; H3 partially supported). With a 37 % variance during the temporary breakup, viewers' PSRs before watching the new season and the distress they experienced during the breakup explained a moderate amount.

7.3.7. Definite breakups

With *Never Have I Ever*, the same hypotheses were tested for definite breakups (Table 5). During the definite breakup, viewers with stronger PSRs indicated more PSB distress than viewers with weaker PSRs ($\beta = 0.50$, $SD = 0.07$, $p < .001$; H1 confirmed). To test H2, the viewer's loneliness was introduced as a moderator. Viewers' PSRs increased their PSB distress ($\beta = 0.61$, $SD = 0.16$, $p < .001$). There was no direct effect of loneliness on PSB distress ($\beta = 0.16$, $SD = 0.20$, $p = .422$) nor interaction effect between PSRs and loneliness ($\beta = -0.05$, $SD = 0.07$, $p = .466$; H2 rejected).

The development of PSRs before and during the definite breakup was tested with a mediation model (Table 6). The results showed that viewers with stronger PSRs before the breakup suffered more from the definite breakup ($\beta = 0.50$, $SD = 0.07$, $p < .001$) and, in turn, reported stronger PSRs during the definite breakup ($\beta = 0.57$, $SD = 0.07$, $p < .001$). Stronger PSRs increased subsequent PSRs

Table 5

Influence of parasocial relationships and viewers' loneliness on temporary, uncertain and definite breakup distress.

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
temporary breakup distress^a				
parasocial relationships	.44	.07	6.76	<0.001
temporary breakup distress^b				
parasocial relationships	.43	.15	2.85	.005
loneliness	.09	.20	.43	.671
interaction effect	.00	.07	.04	.965
uncertain breakup distress^c				
parasocial relationships	.24	.11	2.11	.038
uncertain breakup distress^d				
parasocial relationships	.62	.32	1.95	.055
loneliness	.67	.43	1.57	.120
interaction effect	-0.17	.13	-1.30	.198
definite breakup distress^e				
parasocial relationships	.50	.07	7.65	<0.001
definite breakup distress^f				
parasocial relationships	.61	.16	3.84	<0.001
loneliness	.16	.20	.81	.422
interaction effect	-0.05	.07	-0.73	.466

Note. Temporary breakups: ^a $R^2 = 0.24$, $p < .001$, $F(1140)=45.63$; $n = 142$. ^b $R^2 = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$, $F(3138)=16.03$; $n = 142$. Uncertain breakups: ^c $R^2 = 0.04$, $p = 0.038$, $F(1,93)=4.44$; $n = 94$. ^d $R^2 = 0.08$, $p = 0.067$, $F(3,90)=2.47$; $n = 94$. Definite breakups: ^e $R^2 = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$, $F(1, 140)=58.57$; $n = 140$. ^f $R^2 = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$, $F(3, 136)=19.76$; $n = 140$. Interaction effect: PSR and loneliness. Conditional effects are not indicated as $p > .05$.

Table 6
Relationship between parasocial relationship intensity before and during a parasocial breakup.

	M: breakup distress ^a			DV: parasocial relationships (post) ^b		
	B	SE B	p	B	SE B	p
temporary breakup distress						
parasocial relationships (pre)	.44	.07	<0.001	.68	.06	<0.001
breakup distress				.39	.07	<0.001
uncertain breakup distress						
parasocial relationships (pre)	.24	.11	.038	.40	.10	<0.001
breakup distress				.43	.09	<0.001
definite breakup distress						
parasocial relationships (pre)	.50	.07	<0.001	.57	.07	<0.001
breakup distress				.36	.07	<0.001

Note. Temporary breakup distress: $n = 142$.

^a $R^2 = 0.25, p < .001, F(1140)=45.63$. ^b $R^2 = 0.66, p < 0.001, F(2139)=131.93$. Indirect effect: $B = 0.17, CI[.097, 0.256]$. Uncertain breakup distress: $n = 95$.

^a $R^2 = 0.05, p < .001, F(1,93)=4.44$. ^b $R^2 = 0.37, p < 0.001, F(2,92)=26.56$. Indirect effect: $B = 0.10, CI[-0.007, 0.233]$. Definite breakup distress: $n = 142$.

^a $R^2 = 0.30, p < .001, F(1140)=58.57$. ^b $R^2 = 0.60, p < 0.001, F(2139)=105.12$. Indirect effect: $B = 0.18, CI[.108, 0.256]$.

during the definite breakup ($\beta = 0.36, SD = 0.07, p < .001$), partially confirming H3. PSRs before the release and PSB distress explained 60 % of the PSR variance during the definite breakup.

7.3.8. Comparing the three breakup types (RQ1)

Viewers' PSRs and PSB distress before and during temporary, uncertain, and definite breakups were compared (Table 7). First, PSR strength before and after were compared for each type of breakup. For temporary and uncertain breakups, PSRs did not differ before and after the breakup. During a definite breakup ($t = -2.52, p = .013, df = 141$), viewers indicated significantly stronger PSRs ($M = 2.97, SD = 0.92, n = 142$) than before the definite breakup ($M = 3.12, SD = 0.95, n = 142$).

Second, PSB distress before and after each type of breakup was compared. For uncertain and definite breakups, there were no differences in PSB distress before and after the breakup. Interestingly, viewers' PSB distress before the temporary breakup ($M = 2.26, SD = 0.72, n = 142$) was significantly lower ($t = 3.23, p = .002, df = 141$) than during the temporary breakup ($M = 2.08, SD = 0.80, n = 142$). This shows that, in addition to the type of breakup, the time at which PSB distress is measured is also relevant. Still, no clear patterns could be found for the relationship between PSR and PSB distress for the three breakup types overall (RQ1).

7.3.9. Viewers' alternative activities during a breakup (RQ2)

After having watched the new seasons, viewers were asked to choose from a list of 12 activities the alternative activities they engaged in more (Table 8). For temporary breakups, they chose media and non-media activities. Half indicated they would watch other series. Other preferred activities were spending time with friends/family (35 %), reading books/magazines (34 %), watching TV in general (32 %), watching movies (32 %), or browsing the Internet (30 %). For uncertain breakups, viewers most often indicated watching other series (41 %), followed by watching TV in general (35 %), watching movies (32 %), reading books/magazines (31 %), browsing the Internet (30 %), and listening to music (30 %). Besides reading, alternative media use dominated as an alternative activity during the uncertain breakup. During definite breakups, watching other series (49 %) was chosen most often, followed by browsing the Internet (37 %) and watching TV in general (36 %). Overall, viewers seemed to engage in watching other series more often after finishing a show, regardless of the type of breakup. Re-watching old episodes of the series was an activity only about 20 % of

Table 7
Comparison of parasocial relationships and breakup distress intensities for the three types of breakup distress.

	type of breakup						p	t	df
	before temporary			during temporary					
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n			
parasocial relationships	2.96	.91	142	2.96	1.01	145	.887	-0.14	141
breakup distress	2.26	.80	142	2.08	.80	145	.002	3.23	141
	before uncertain			during uncertain					
parasocial relationships	3.16	.84	96	3.17	.96	97	.957	-0.05	94
breakup distress	2.21	.75	96	2.20	.93	97	.869	.17	94
	before definite			during definite					
parasocial relationships	2.97	.92	142	3.12	.95	142	.013	-2.52	141
breakup distress	2.22	.86	142	2.22	.85	142	.987	.02	141

Note. t-tests for dependent samples for each of the three samples. temporary – temporary: *Emily in Paris*. temporary – uncertain: *Shadow and Bone*. temporary – definite: *Never Have I Ever*.

Table 8
Activities viewers engage in more during temporary, uncertain, and definite breakups.

activities	temporary		uncertain		definite	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
exercising / sports	42	29 %	24	25 %	34	24 %
reading books / magazines	49	34 %	30	31 %	37	26 %
studying / working	40	28 %	22	23 %	34	24 %
spending time with friends or family	51	35 %	25	26 %	43	30 %
watching other series	73	50 %	40	41 %	69	49 %
watching TV in general	47	32 %	34	35 %	51	36 %
browsing the Internet	43	30 %	29	30 %	52	37 %
listening to music	42	29 %	29	30 %	44	31 %
re-watch old episodes of the series	30	21 %	18	19 %	29	20 %
watching movies	46	32 %	31	32 %	46	32 %
talking to friends or family	37	26 %	20	21 %	45	32 %
browsing Social Media	39	27 %	22	23 %	43	30 %

Note: Viewers were asked to choose all the activities they will engage more in after having finished watching the new season. The numbers and percentages indicated refer to the viewers who have chosen this activity. The total number of chosen activities for temporary breakups ($M = 4.45$, $SD=2.76$), uncertain breakups ($M = 3.81$, $SD=2.41$), and definite breakups ($M = 4.93$, $SD=3.10$).

the viewers engaged in during all three types of breakups.

8. General discussion

Viewers develop meaningful relationships with media characters through mediated encounters (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). These PSRs (e.g., Gleich, 1996; Tukachinsky, 2011), and their dissolution (e.g., Eyal & Cohen, 2006), are often compared to social relationships. After a PSB, viewers experience similar emotional distress as after the dissolution of a friendship (Cohen, 2004). Research has focused on two types of PSB, namely definite breakups, when the dissolution is final, and temporary breakups, when viewers must wait until they can continue their mediated relationship (Hu, 2023). This paper considered viewers' autonomy over parasocial encounters on streaming platforms and introduced uncertain PSBs, which occur when viewers must endure uncertainty over their PSRs after the release of a new season because it is unclear if and when new episodes will be released.

The research presented in Study I and Study II adds to the existing literature in three ways. First, with uncertain breakups, a third type of PSB was introduced in addition to definite (Cohen, 2003) and temporary breakups (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). Second, the three types of breakups were analyzed in two studies, allowing a direct comparison between their effects on viewers. Third, the analysis of viewers' PSRs and PSB distress considered their autonomy over the media content on streaming platforms (Granow et al., 2018) in a natural setting. Viewers could engage in their usual viewing behavior, producing high external validity. Fourth, behavioral effects were explored besides the affective effects of PSBs.

The assumption that viewers with stronger PSRs suffer more emotionally from PSBs with media characters than those with weaker PSRs was confirmed in both studies (H1). With that, the already proven relationships for definite breakups (e.g., J. Cohen, 2003; Eyal & Cohen, 2006), fictional (e.g., Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011) and non-fictional media characters (e.g., Bingaman, 2022; Siegenthaler et al., 2021), and different settings, such as self-chosen breakups (e.g., Bond & Calvert, 2014; Hu, 2016; Hu et al., 2018) or forced breakups due to the show ending (e.g., Ellithorpe & Brookes, 2018; Eyal & Cohen, 2006), was proven for uncertain breakups as well. Additionally, Lather and Moyer-Guse's (2011) findings on temporary breakups could be confirmed. These findings underline the importance of considering viewers' emotional reactions, even if the breakup is temporary or uncertain. For example, producers need to gauge viewers' possible reactions when creating media content with multiple parts.

The dissolution of PSRs is often compared to that of social relationships (Cohen, 2003, 2004). The finding that lonely viewers suffer more from a definite PSB (Eyal & Cohen, 2006) was re-analyzed (H2). In Study I, lonely viewers had the strongest relationship between PSRs and PSB distress, but only for temporary breakups. In Study II, loneliness did not influence PSB distress or the PSR–PSB distress relationship in any of the three breakups. The results showed that viewers' PSRs are a strong indicator of PSB distress, despite their level of loneliness. More research is needed to see if other personality traits, such as viewers' attachment style, should be considered (e.g., Barbara & Dion, 2000; Cohen, 2004).

In Study II, the influence of viewers' PSRs on their subsequent breakup distress and PSRs were analyzed (H3). For all three types of breakups, it was shown that viewers' PSR before a new season's release increased breakup distress after finishing the season. Against the assumption, breakup distress led to stronger subsequent PSRs. These initial findings for PSR and PSB distress development over time are essential. PSRs are considered a dynamic concept (Klimmt et al., 2006); however, they are often analyzed at only a single point in time. Because they can develop beyond media exposure (Dibble et al., 2016), considering their long-time development is crucial. Future research should analyze PSRs' progression over time, as in social relationship research (e.g., Knapp et al., 2014; Levinger, 1980). For example by empirically examining the theoretical model of the development of PSRs based on relationship development (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019) while considering viewers' uncertain, temporary, and definite PSBs.

Viewers' PSR and PSB distress intensity before and during a breakup were compared for the three PSB types (RQ1). In Study I, viewers' breakup distress was stronger after a definite breakup than during a temporary breakup, although this could not be replicated in Study II. Viewers' PSB distress during a definite breakup was not stronger than during a temporary breakup, but their level of PSRs

differed. During a temporary breakup, they indicated lower PSRs than during a definite breakup. This is important to consider, as it shows that a breakup can strengthen a mediated relationship. In future studies, it would be important to see their development over time; Do viewers only experience strong PSR directly after the beginning of the definite breakup, or is their level of PSR stable even over a longer time with no new content with the media character? A second interesting result for RQ1 in Study II was that *Emily in Paris* viewers indicated stronger temporary breakup distress just before the release of the new season than after it. In both cases, they experienced temporary breakup distress. In the first case, they knew that new episodes would soon be released, which, interestingly, resulted in stronger emotional distress than when they finished the new episodes and were at the beginning of a temporary breakup.

Viewers' behavioral reactions to breakups were only analyzed in Study II (RQ2), and they were asked which activities they would engage in more after finishing the new season. They supplemented with media activities, especially during uncertain and definite breakups. During temporary breakups, they also indicated non-media activities such as spending time with friends/family. During all three breakup types, watching other series was the most preferred activity. These results add to the literature. The consideration of viewers' current possibilities with self-determined viewing practices on streaming platforms expands existing knowledge of the behavioral effects of PSB (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011), underlining the importance of media activities as alternatives. This also highlights that viewers did not cut social tasks while watching the new season and, after that, wanted to reinstate the usual level of social contact. It would be interesting to see if this effect would be different, for example, for fan groups or individuals with a strong show affinity (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011).

During all three types of breakups, the most preferred alternative activity was watching other series, although old episodes of the same series were not often watched. This is somewhat surprising because re-watching old episodes would take little effort in the current media environment. Using DVD boxes to binge-watch or re-watch favorite series could also be done during linear television, but mostly only fans chose to do so (Granow et al., 2018; Jenner, 2014). That viewers rather watch other series than re-watch old episodes is an important finding. It suggests that new actions and content with the media character are necessary for viewers to develop their PSRs. It seems that the emotional distress of the PSB is not from the lack of being able to have parasocial encounters. Viewers need new content to develop their relationships and, with that, overcome the emotional distress. It is also possible that the viewers' distress was not intense enough. As in other studies (Eyal & Cohen, 2006), viewers' breakup distress was low in both studies for all breakup types. It would be interesting to see if viewers experiencing intense breakup distress engage more in re-watching old episodes to keep their relationship with the media character ongoing.

Overall, temporary, uncertain, and definite breakups differ slightly regarding their affective and behavioral effects on viewers. This is interesting because, from a theoretical perspective, the three breakup types differ in their predictability level, and predictability is essential for relationship development with media characters (Klimmt et al., 2006) and with friends (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Knobloch, 2015). In future research, the role of predictability and viewers' management of uncertainty in their relationships should be explored further. Applying theories from social relationships, such as uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Knobloch, 2015) or uncertainty management theory (Brashers, 2001), could be helpful to understand better viewers' engagement in their PSRs, especially when they endure uncertainty.

8.1. General outlook and future research

This paper offers several implications or suggestions for future studies. First, this research analyzed viewer PSR in the sense of friendship with a media character. In future studies, it would be interesting to analyze also other types of relationships between viewers and media characters. For example, the effect of different types of parasocial breakups on viewers' romantic PSRs (Liebers & Straub, 2020; Tukachinsky, 2011) and their development could be assessed. It would be interesting to explore whether the effects of uncertainty in PSBs differ between romantic and friendship PSRs. Other forms of viewer involvement with media characters, such as identification or fandom (Brown, 2015), could also be analyzed in relation to PSBs. Second, this paper only considered the fictional media characters the viewers developed PSRs with, and not the actors or actresses. One part of the parasocial breakup distress scale is the continued relationships with the actor or actress of the media character. In future studies, it would be important to consider viewers' engagement with the actors also in other productions. For example, as an alternative activity, it could include watching other shows with the same actor or actress or following them on Social Media. Third, experimental studies creating the three different types of breakups would add to the literature about PSBs. By experimentally manipulating the types of breakups with the same media content, the results could be compared without the influence of possible confounding variables that were present in this field studies in Study I and Study II.

8.2. General limitations

This paper has several limitations. First, the high external validity has drawbacks. In Study I, some samples were relatively small, since data collection had to be stopped earlier than planned. In Study II, the samples were larger and more balanced; however, there was still a dropout rate between the first and the second survey. If the participants of the first survey had not watched the new season in time, they could not participate in the second. The final sample would likely constitute more motivated viewers. This needs to be considered when interpreting results that could differ from a broader sample, constituting viewers with lower engagement with the series and the media characters.

Second, Study II did not fully consider the temporal order between PSRs and PSB distress. In the mediation model of H3, viewers' PSB distress (mediator) and PSRs (dependent variable) were measured in the second survey after the new seasons' release. Thus, causality cannot be proven. It could be that viewers' PSRs after finishing the new seasons influenced their breakup distress at this time.

It would be interesting for future studies to measure viewers' PSRs and PSB distress over a longer period, thereby considering other factors, such as the development of their PSB distress when an uncertain breakup turns into a temporary or definite one due to a new future series announcement.

Third, the three PSB types were analyzed with five fictional protagonists of popular television series. Three popular series covering different genres and suitable characters were chosen in both studies. Still, generalization of the results is not possible. In future studies, it would be necessary to analyze these effects in other settings. For example, temporary, uncertain, and definite breakups with non-fictional media characters could be compared in future studies, or the analysis could be expanded by including different formats, such as talk shows or reality TV shows.

Fourth, the new seasons' content was not considered. For example, when comparing a viewer's PSR with a media character, it could be important to consider the character's behavior. If the viewer had a positive relationship with this character and indicated so in the first survey, but the character did something they disliked in the new season, they could indicate a lower PSR because of that behavior and not due to the type of breakup. Thus, in future studies, it would be fruitful to explore components of the content that would be important to include in future analyses.

9. General conclusion

This paper contributes to the literature by introducing a new type of PSB and comparing the three types. Viewers' PSRs and PSB distress were analyzed in a natural setting, respecting their new autonomy over media content on streaming platforms, and with that, over their parasocial encounters. The results show that viewers experience PSB distress without permanent loss and in uncertain situations. Differences emerged between temporary, uncertain, and definite breakups, for example, considering viewers' loneliness in the relationships between PSRs and breakup distress. For all types of breakups, stronger PSRs increase viewers' emotional distress, which in turn influences subsequent PSRs. Additionally, this paper explored the alternate activities viewers engaged in to overcome their breakup after finishing a new season, finding that they most often engaged in media-related activities, especially watching other series. The results emphasize the importance of considering all three breakup types and differentiating them when analyzing the dissolution of PSRs.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Michelle Möri: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. The author declares that there is no conflict of interest. The data supporting this paper's findings are available on OSF: <https://osf.io/tpf6x/>.

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