

Parasocial Relationship Strength and the Need for Social Well-Being as a Function of Gender Identification

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Introduction and Background

Humans are fundamentally social beings that seek out connections and feelings of belonging in most contexts we find ourselves in. Because of this, people are drawn not just to others who reciprocate connections in offline and online spaces, but also to figures who do not. Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are attachments formed between consumers of a media and a non-reciprocating person or figure that serve a similar role to typical reciprocal relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956). One such benefit includes the ability to temporarily satisfy social needs when positive connections are not readily available (Giles, 2002). Most studies examining PSRs focus on the general population while very few focus on more niche groups such as the LGBTQ+ community, more specifically, no work has looked at the role of PSRs among transgender and nonbinary people. Previous research suggests PSRs may temporarily replace and satisfy social needs among individuals whose identities and needs are not well supported in their relationships (i.e. transgender and nonbinary identities) more often than cisgender individuals (Rosaen & Dibble, 2016; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019).

The present work focuses on non-cisgender identities as a group that may benefit from this compensatory function of PSRs. To examine this, an online study was conducted to see if cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary individuals (N=98) differ on measures of social support, social well-being and parasocial relationship strength. With this goal in mind, the article will

proceed as follows. First, I will review relevant background literature about media, social belonging, and parasocial relationships. Next, I will discuss the study's hypotheses, methodology, and materials. Finally, I will present the results and discuss potential future directions.

Media and Well-Being

Mass media is a powerful tool that impacts day-to-day life by influencing how the public sees and treats groups of people. For some populations, such as the LGBTQ+ community, the media can encourage prejudice towards individuals who have a marginalized identity (Fürsich, 2010). In 1938 the Hays Code was enacted which put heavy censorship restrictions on American films and prohibited the portrayal of certain topics such as profanity, interracial dating, and LGBTQ+ individuals. Although the code was lifted in 1968 the damage was already done, LGBTQ+ representation in media was consistently negative until approximately twenty years ago when it began to improve (Chen, 2018). Still, many portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals are one-dimensional or stereotypical of the identity depicted (Scharrer, Ramasubramanian, & Banjo, 2022), even if they are not outright hostile towards the group.

How a population is portrayed in the media has broader effects on well-being and personal development. Generally, how someone views themselves is developed over time during social interactions, leading to subconscious incorporation of others' views into their own self-perception (Baumeister, 2010; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Mead, 1913). The feedback does not need to come explicitly from others, but how someone thinks others perceive them is sufficient to affect how someone feels about themselves (Markus & Kunda, 1986). This consequently improves or worsens their self-image. Feeling connected and accepted is crucial for a healthy sense of self,

as social belonging links many different processes within a person that affect their sense of well-being.

Social Belonging Needs

Social belonging is a fundamental human need that is intertwined with physical and mental well-being. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1968) the only things more important than social belonging are physical needs (e.g. food, shelter) and safety. Many subsequent studies support this and show that when these social needs are not fulfilled, there are a number of negative consequences that harm a person's well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Physically, unmet social needs are associated with an increased risk of eating disorders (Levine, 2013), immune system dysfunction (Jaremka & Sunami, 2018), and many more health concerns. These effects are often found alongside psychological effects such as a profound sense of loneliness (Anderson & Arnoult, 1985) and increased suicidal ideation (Bailey & McLaren, 2005). Even though belonging and social well-being (i.e. dimensions associated with forming healthy relationships) are crucial for an individual's health, opportunities may not always be available for interaction when a need is felt.

Unfortunately, some populations may face more difficulties surrounding social well-being than others. One such population people is the transgender and nonbinary community. They are more likely to face familial rejection and harassment than cisgender individuals (Gamarel et al., 2014; Garcia et al., 2020). Because of transphobia and stigma, they face higher risks of depression (McConnell, Birkett, & Mustanski, 2015), suicide (di Giacomo et al., 2018), and substance abuse (Day et al., 2017). Additionally, there is a deficit of positive representations of marginalized individuals in media that could act as a positive role model, and any that exist may face negative responses from outgroup members (e.g. Galdi, Guizzo, & Fasoli, 2023).

Lower social support makes it more difficult to have a positive self-image, which is important for buffering stressors that occur with having a marginalized identity (Almario et al., 2013; Meyer, 2003). Positive social support helps maintain this buffer; however, many transgender and nonbinary individuals may face difficulty fulfilling social needs due to a variety of factors such as location, cultural norms where they live, and transphobia. As a result, many do not receive enough social connection to facilitate social needs, resulting in a greater chance of the negative consequences discussed previously. However, there are a few ways to temporarily satisfy social needs when connection with others is not available, one method being parasocial relationships.

Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are one-sided attachments formed between an individual and a non-reciprocating other person, usually a figure from media (Horton & Wohl, 1956). These attachment figures are referred to as 'personae' and can be real people (i.e. actors, musicians, etc.) or fictional such as a character from a television show. PSRs are defined by their non-reciprocating nature, the persona does not interact back with the individual but still provides a feeling of intimacy and connection. This connection is not defined by hard boundaries, as relationships exist on a spectrum that can change depending on the social context (Tukachinsky, Walter, & Saucier, 2021). For example, a person can have a PSR with an Instagram influencer that does not personally talk back to the individual in question. However, the relationship can temporarily go from a parasocial relationship to a reciprocal one if the individual were to meet this influencer in-person before returning to a PSR once the period of contact is over. This process cannot replicate with a fictional character, as they do not exist, and thus in that context it remains a PSR indefinitely.

Parasocial relationships are often studied through the lens of social belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) since they are considered a form of social interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Even though personae do not reciprocate, the socio-emotional effects of PSRs mirror those of reciprocal relationships. Excluding the most extreme cases, individuals with PSRs know the persona will not reciprocate, but they nonetheless feel a real sense of connection because they are understood to be an extension of one's social circle. Due to this, PSRs develop by similar processes as forming reciprocal relationships such as increased exposure, perceived similarity, using social standards to form an impression, and empathy (Bond, 2018; Klimmt, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2009; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Scherer et al., 2022; Tukachinsky, Walter, & Saucier, 2021). The benefits of PSRs also mirror those of reciprocal relationships including fulfilling belonging needs (Giles, 2002; MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2022) and buffering the negative effects of when social interaction is not readily available (Gardner, Pickett, & Knowles, 2005). Therefore, forming PSRs may be a way to satisfy the need to belong when positive connection is not readily available which could be especially beneficial for individuals who have a marginalized identity and face challenges with social belonging.

The Current Study

In summary, parasocial relationships are one method of satisfying social needs when they are not fulfilled. While limited data exists, there is some that suggest transgender and nonbinary individuals are more likely to form PSRs when not fulfilled by reciprocal social relationships (Bond, 2018; Rosaen & Dibble, 2016; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). The present study sought to compare transgender and nonbinary (TNB) individuals to a cisgender sample on measures of social support, social well-being, and parasocial relationship strength. I hypothesized that (a) TNB individuals would have lower perceived offline social support than cisgender individuals,

- (b) TNB individuals would score lower than cisgender people on average social well-being, and
- (c) TNB individuals would report stronger parasocial relationships than cisgender participants even when exposure frequency is controlled for.

Method

Participants

250 participants were recruited using Connect.com, an online crowdsourcing website, and were paid \$2 for a 15-minute questionnaire. Participants identified themselves as either cisgender (male/female), transgender (male/female), or nonbinary. There were no demographic group differences between the transgender and nonbinary samples on any variable, thus the samples were combined into one, referred to as the TNB group. The cisgender participants also had no gender differences on any measure, and were kept into one group labeled the 'Cisgender' sample. Only participants who identify as White were recruited to control for the interaction of other marginalized identities on the variables and ensure only gender was salient.

Intersectionality is extremely important, and future studies should include other underrepresented marginalized identities in their data. However, the goal of the present study is to isolate gender as the identity of interest. Exclusions were made from completing less than 90% of the questionnaire, failed attention checks, and identifying with a race other than White. The final sample consisted of 227 participants with 98 Participants as part of the TNB sample and 129 in the cisgender group with ages ranging from 18 to 68 ($M=34.930$ $SD=10.551$).

Procedure

After informed consent and demographic information was obtained, participants completed questions about their perceived social support and social well-being dimensions. They were then prompted to write the name of a fictional character they strongly relate to from a piece

of media to prime them for subsequent questions. Fictional characters were selected to be examined over celebrities because they do not have the additional layer of potentially interacting back on social media or real-life and there are fewer studies examining fictitious PSRs. The only noted restriction was that the character could not be from a video game as the medium offers a more dynamic way of interacting with personae and thus requires different methodology. The persona's perceived race and gender identity were also collected as part of the priming task. These were not analyzed in the results because their purpose was to ensure the participant is thinking about the persona in the subsequent questions. Finally, participants completed a measure of parasocial relationship strength with the persona and reported how frequently they are exposed to them via different mediums (e.g. television, online). Upon completion they received further elaboration about the study and were provided with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) helpline number in case they experienced any psychological distress, though it was not anticipated.

Measures

Perceived Social Support

Offline Social Support. To measure offline social support participants completed the 12-item *Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support* (MPSS) (Zimet et al., 1988; $\alpha=.88$). They were assessed using all three subscales (family, friends, and romantic relationships) on a scale of 1 (*Very strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Very strongly agree*).

Online Social Support. Online social support was measured using an adapted version of the 'friends' subscale from the MPSS to reflect online relationships (Zimet et al., 1988; $\alpha=.75$). For example, "*I can count on my friends when things go wrong*" was changed to "*I can count on my online friends when things go wrong*".

Exposure Questions

TNB and cisgender participants were exposed to two different sets of questions created by the researcher depending on their gender identity and responded with yes or no for each. While there are no predictions based on the questions, they were created to supplement the variable of perceived social support and provide more insight for how many participants know transgender and nonbinary people both offline and online. The cisgender sample was asked “*Do you have connections with others in your offline life who are transgender or nonbinary?*” and “*Do you have connections with others in your online life who are transgender or nonbinary?*”. The TNB sample was asked “*Do you have connections in your offline life that share your gender identity?*” and “*Do you have connections in your online life that share your gender identity?*”.

Social Well-Being Variables

To measure social well-being the present study used the methodology of Rosaen & Dibble (2016) by assessing three of the most common variables associated with the construct: loneliness, the need to belong, and social anxiety.

Loneliness. Participants completed the *Three-Item Loneliness Scale* (Hughes et al., 2004; $\alpha=.72$) to examine their general sense of loneliness. They indicated how frequently they experience the scenarios given (e.g. “*How often do you feel left out?*”) on a 5-point scale from 1 (*Hardly ever*) to 5 (*Often*).

Need to belong. The desire for social contact, or the need to belong, was assessed using the *Need to Belong Scale* (Leary et al., 2013; $\alpha=.81$). Participants answered how characteristic the given statements were of them (e.g. “*I want other people to accept me*”) on a scale of 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely*).

Social Anxiety. A participant's general, non-clinical, sense of social anxiety was examined using the *Social Anxiety* subscale of the *Self-Consciousness Scale* (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975; $\alpha=.84$). They responded to the provided statements and indicated how characteristic they were of them on a scale of 1 (*Extremely uncharacteristic*) to 5 (*Extremely characteristic*).

Parasocial Relationship Strength

The strength of parasocial attachment between the participant and the persona were measured using an adapted version of the *Parasocial Relationship Scale* (Hartmann, Stuke & Daschmann, 2008; $\alpha =.82$). Questions were reworded to reflect a parasocial relationship with the media persona they previously specified (e.g. "My favorite racing driver makes me feel as comfortable as when I am with friends" is changed to "My favorite character makes me feel as comfortable as when I am with friends"). Participants responded with their level of agreement on a scale of 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*).

Results

All analyses were conducted using SPSS after the data was cleaned for quality and continuous variables were standardized into z-scores ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$). Before examining the main hypotheses, independent samples t-tests were conducted to see if there were overall differences between the gender groups of both the cisgender samples (male v. female) and between the transgender (man v. woman) and nonbinary samples. No meaningful gender differences were found between the cisgender men and women and were grouped together during hypothesis testing as the 'Cisgender' group. There were also no group differences between the transgender and nonbinary participants and thus they were combined into the 'TNB' group. No gender differences were found within groups based on gender presentation (male, female,

nonbinary). Additionally, the three social well-being measures (loneliness, need to belong, and social anxiety) were all significantly correlated with each other (means and correlations presented in Table 1) and thus averaged into one composite variable called ‘social well-being’ during hypothesis testing. All means, standard deviations, and t-test results of the group comparisons are presented in Table 2 and effect sizes are represented using Cohen’s *d*.

Table 1
Zero-Order Correlations of Social Well-Being Variables

Variable	n	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Loneliness	227	2.890	1.239	-		
2. Need to Belong	227	3.040	0.831	0.414**	-	
3. Social Anxiety	227	3.710	0.834	0.386**	0.347**	-

** $p < .01$

Table 2
Comparisons Between TNB and Cisgender Samples

Variables	TNB			Cisgender			<i>t</i> (225)	<i>p</i>	Cohen’s <i>d</i>
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD			
1. IRL Social Support	98	4.730	1.249	129	5.101	1.250	-2.224	0.014	1.250
2. Online Social Support	98	4.830	1.316	129	4.050	1.588	3.903	<.001	1.477
3. Social Well-Being	98	3.519	0.597	129	3.004	0.690	5.897	<.001	0.652
4. PSR Strength	98	3.770	0.494	129	3.650	0.534	1.639	0.051	0.517

The first research question sought to replicate previous work supporting that cisgender participants scored higher on offline social support than TNB participants. As expected, TNB participants reported lower offline social support ($M=4.73$, $SD=1.25$) compared to cisgender participants ($M=5.10$, $SD=1.25$), $t(225)=1.64$, $p=.014$, $d=1.25$. Conversely, TNB participants reported more online social support ($M=4.83$, $SD=1.32$) compared to the cisgender sample ($M=4.05$, $SD=1.59$, $t(225)=3.90$, $p<.001$, $d=1.48$).

The single item measures showed interesting results as well, though no predictions were made about them. 41.803% of cisgender participants ($n=51$) did not know any transgender people in their offline life compared to the 62.245% of TNB individuals who did know someone

who shared their identity (n=61). In the cisgender sample seven participants failed to answer this question but were still included in analysis because they answered more than 90% of the entire survey. Even fewer cisgender participants knew a transgender or nonbinary person online, though every participant answered this question (35.659%, n=46). Conversely, 81.633% of transgender participants knew someone who shared their identity online (n=80).

The second research question asked if TNB individuals would score lower than the cisgender sample on social well-being measures. An independent samples t-test was again used to examine group differences in the need for social well-being. As predicted, TNB individuals reported significantly worse social well-being ($M=3.52$, $SD=0.60$) than the cisgender sample ($M=3.00$, $SD=0.69$, $t(225)=-5.90$, $p<.001$, $d=.65$).

The final research question examined if TNB individuals report stronger parasocial relationship strength than cisgender participants even when exposure frequency is controlled for. Independent samples t-tests showed no significant differences between cisgender and TNB participants on the measure of PSR strength ($t(225)=1.639$, $p=0.051$, $d=.52$). It should be noted that the cutoff for significance level was $p < .05$, however the p-level of the data was very close to statistical significance at $p= .051$ (See Table 2). This finding was still found even when controlling for exposure frequency.

Discussion

Transgender and nonbinary individuals are extremely underrepresented in the wider literature, even the subfield studying the LGBTQ+ community most often focuses on sexual orientation rather than marginalized gender identities. The goal of the present study was to examine how transgender and nonbinary individuals differ from cisgender participants on measures of perceived social support, social well-being, and parasocial relationship strength.

Based on previous research it was hypothesized that TNB individuals would report less offline social interaction and worse social well-being compared to their cisgender peers. We also expected to find that TNB individuals would report stronger PSRs than the cisgender sample.

The first hypothesis was supported and showed TNB individuals reported lower offline support compared to the cisgender sample but indicated the TNB group had greater online social support. This finding replicated past studies showing people identifying as transgender or nonbinary report less in-person social support than cisgender people (O’Handley & Courtice, 2022; Rutter, 2007). The second hypothesis was also supported; transgender and nonbinary individuals reported significantly worse social well-being compared to the cisgender sample. Hypothesis three, however, was not supported as there were no significant differences between the TNB and cisgender groups in PSR strength.

Taken together, the study’s findings imply that individuals who are transgender or nonbinary experience less offline support and thus may seek more online support. While the measures of social well-being did not differentiate between offline and online interactions, the TNB group reported worse overall social well-being. It is possible that the lower offline support and social well-being may contribute to seeking more online connections, though this association cannot be made from the present data. Some of those online connections may then be classified as PSRs, which are considered a form of online support. The perceived social support measure did not ask the participants to specify if the online connections were PSRs but given that all participants were able to think of a character they strongly related to, it is possible that form of relationship could be included because while the difference in PSR strength was not statistically significant between groups, it was still close and may warrant future consideration. As PSRs are associated with positive well-being outcomes, they may still be beneficial for individuals who

have a marginalized identity by providing a sense of connection when social needs cannot be satisfied in reciprocal relationships.

Conclusion and Future Directions

As with any study, there are a few limitations to address. First, the study was conducted online rather than in the laboratory. While this is not a limitation alone, the online study may have unintentionally biased participants to report higher levels of online social support since online communication may be more salient on a crowdsourcing website. A second limitation is that the study design is correlational, and thus causal conclusions cannot be made about the findings. Namely, this study can not establish if TNB participants report lower in-person support and social well-being *because* of their identity or due to unaccounted factors. Future studies should examine additional moderating variables to control for outside confounds or employ an experimental design to test these associations.

Similarly, a potential future direction could examine characteristics that predict stronger PSRs in this population. While there was no statistical difference in PSR strength between the two groups despite the differing social well-being outcomes, there may be additional moderators affecting the relationship that were not examined in this study. For example, if the personae represent some aspect of the individual's identity, such as their gender, PSR strength may increase, leading to greater well-being outcomes. Additionally, this study is the first to examine a transgender and nonbinary sample in the PSR literature. Transgender and nonbinary identities are woefully underrepresented in psychological literature, and many studies using this population focus on the majority cisgender population and their attitudes towards TNB individuals rather than the community members themselves. Future studies should be designed looking at this

population both in a general sense, and within the parasocial literature to further examine how gender impacts the consumption and emotional use of media personae.

The present results further support that transgender and nonbinary individuals face difficulties with offline social support which may lead to worse social well-being outcomes, however online connections may provide a space to fulfill social needs not met in-person. Finally, the results also provide a novel addition to the PSR literature by comparing the PSR strength of transgender and nonbinary participants to those of a cisgender sample.

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