

THESIS

SUPERNATURAL FRIENDSHIPS:
PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND THE PROVISIONS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

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ABSTRACT

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Parasocial relationships and social support both have independently rich literatures within the field of communication. However, until this study, parasocial relationship partners had not been considered as social support providers. This study furthers scholarly understandings of both parasocial relationships and social support by considering the two relational phenomena in tandem. Fans of the American television show *Supernatural* with a strong parasocial relationship with a character from the series were interviewed regarding their feelings towards their parasocial relationship partner and how they feel supported by their parasocial relationship partner. Analysis of the interviews revealed participants received *esteem support*, *informational support*, *emotional support*, and *social network support* from their parasocial relationship partners. The finding that parasocial relationship partners can and do provide social support challenges current understandings of social support as reciprocal and intentional. Two methods by which participants received support without reciprocity and intentionality are proposed: *imagined support* and *constructed support*. Additionally, this study investigated the characteristics of supportive messages. Participants watched scenes from *Supernatural* and identified qualities that made messages supportive or unsupportive. The data from this study corroborated existing methods of categorizing supportive messages such as verbal person centeredness and nonverbal immediacy. Lastly, this study compared support received while watching *troubles talk scenes* (scenes in which a problem is discussed) and *ordinary*

conversation scenes (scenes in which anything but a problem is discussed) to compare Goldsmith's Normative Approach to social support and Lakey and Orehek's Relational Regulation Theory. This study offers a new approach to describing parasocial relationships through the lens of social support and extends the relational contexts in which social support can be given and received.

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

The body of literature on social support is vast, spanning disciplines and concepts, from what encompasses a supportive message (Burlison, 2008) to the mechanisms through which social support benefits health (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000). Given the extent of these health benefits, both physical (Berkman & Syme, 1979) and mental/emotional – including stigma management (Hinck, Hinck, Smith, & Withers, 2019), reduced loneliness and depression (Segrin, 2003), increased sense of belonging (Davis, 2017), and uncertainty management (Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2004) – social support research has value beyond academia. Through the normative approach to social support (Goldsmith, 2004), researchers can interrogate the value of different types of support (Cutrona & Suhr, 1994) across situations and individuals, leading to a better understanding of how best to express social support. Yet, missing from this research on social support is the consideration of a specific type of social support provider: a parasocial relationship partner.

Parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956) broadly describe the relationships media consumers form with media personalities whom they do not personally know and interact with, whether because the personality is fictional or inaccessible (i.e. a celebrity). Research on parasocial relationships has made the case that parasocial relationships are conceptually and structurally similar to face-to-face relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956) across stages of relationship development (Rubin & McHugh, 1987) and decline (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). Similar to supportive communication, parasocial relationships have benefits to mental and emotional health, including stigma management (Hoffner & Cohen, 2012, 2015) and increased sense of

belonging (Derrick, Gabriel, & Tippin, 2008). However, despite the similarities in benefits of social support and parasocial relationships, literature linking the two concepts is incomplete.

Thus far, the only research which explores fictional or inaccessible individuals as social support providers does so incompletely by failing to consider parasocial relationship partners as social support providers (Lakey, Cooper, Cronin, & Whitaker, 2014; Olson, 2018). Yet, the social support theory in which these studies are grounded, relational regulation theory, is essential to exploring the relationship between parasocial relationships and social support. Relational regulation theory posits that a recipient of social support does not need to interact with a partner to receive support but rather can observe the partner interact with others and still receive similar benefits (Lakey & Orehek, 2011).

The present study combines psychology's relational regulation theory (Lakey & Orehek, 2011) with communication's normative approach to social support (Goldsmith, 2004) in order to give proper consideration to the ability of parasocial relationships to provide social support to television viewers. The study utilizes the American television show *Supernatural* as a site to examine parasocial relationships and social support due to its lengthy fifteen season run and high levels of fan engagement (Ulaby, 2014). Through interviews with viewers of *Supernatural*, the present study specifically seeks to expand knowledge on what aspects of messages are considered supportive by considering parasocial relationships as an alternative source of social support.

I will first explore the literature on parasocial relationships to establish the similarities between parasocial relationships and face-to-face relationships in terms of development, dissolution, and benefits. I will then overview social support and its benefits, focusing on the normative approach before introducing relational regulation theory and demonstrating how

parasocial relationships, the normative approach, and relational regulation theory operate together in this study.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

Parasocial Relationships

The term parasocial relationship (PSR) was first coined by Horton and Wohl (1956) to explain the feelings of intimacy a media consumer perceives towards a media personality or performer. While Horton and Wohl (1956) focused on PSRs between spectators and personae – a catch-all term the pair designated to describe a specific type of media personality including game show hosts, announcers, talk show hosts, and others whose job it is to speak directly to the camera and the people at home – the authors describe the potential formation of PSRs with many types of media personalities, both real and fictional, including television/movie characters and the actors who portray them, as well as radio personalities and other celebrities. Since Horton and Wohl’s initial claims, research has focused on and described PSRs formed with fictional television characters (Bond, 2018; DeGroot & Leith, 2018; Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Lather & Moyer-Gusé, 2011; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin & McHugh, 1987), celebrities (Bond, 2018; Derrick et al., 2008; Hoffner & Cohen, 2018), YouTubers (Chen, 2016; Kurtin, O’Brien, Roy, & Dam, 2018; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019), video game characters and avatars (Jin & Park, 2009; Lewis, Weber, & Bowman, 2008; Song & Fox, 2016), and book characters (Bond, 2018; Liebers & Schramm, 2017; Schmid & Klimmt, 2011).

Horton and Wohl (1956) describe the relationship between spectator and performer as illusions “because the relationship between the person and any member of his [sic] audience is inevitably one-sided, and reciprocity between the two can only be suggested” (p. 217). In a PSR, a media performer does have the ability to communicate a message to the viewer, but the viewer, even if they respond aloud and “talk” to the on-screen performer, will not have their message

received by the performer. This is especially true if the media figure is fictional. In theory, a media viewer may be able to get in touch with an actor via fan mail or social media, but the character with whom they wish to communicate does not exist and thus cannot receive the message. This means communication can, at maximum, be one-way communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). While it is this lack of reciprocity that sets PSRs apart from other mediated and face-to-face relationships (FTFRs), there are additional qualifications for a relationship to be a parasocial relationship, rather than an instance of one of several related, yet different phenomena including parasocial interaction (PSI), transportation (Gerrig, 1993), and identification (Cohen, 2001).

First, it is important to note that early parasocial research did not delineate between a PSR and a PSI. However, the two concepts, while related, are not the same. The difference between PSRs and PSIs is, in short, a matter of when a connection is felt by the viewer. According to Hartmann (2016), a PSI is an illusionary experience in which media viewers interpret the image of a person as a living being to whom they can respond. This means, in the viewing moment, the viewer feels they are being addressed personally, rather than as part of a mass audience. A PSI is momentary and fleeting, while a PSR, though also termed illusionary (Horton & Wohl, 1956) is much more durable and long-lasting. Hartmann (2016) notes that PSRs extend beyond the moment of viewing. In a PSR, an individual might think fondly of their PSR partner while they are washing dishes or going about their daily routine. While PSIs can be part of a PSR, the viewer need never feel as if the media personality is speaking directly to them. PSRs do not require the “breaking of the fourth wall” (Hartmann, 2016).

Transportation, like PSIs, can occur in the context of a PSR but is not necessary to those relationships and is a distinct experience. Tal-Or and Cohen (2016) describe transportation as “a

concept that describes the way people tend to become immersed in the story world. Audience members feel as if they are removed from their immediate environment and present in the world of the narrative” (pp. 33-34). Transportation may be something individuals engage in in order to imagine interaction with their PSR partner, but just as PSRs do not require breaking the fourth wall, they do not require transportation.

Lastly, identification, like both PSIs and transportation, can occur within a PSR but also is a separate experience possible outside of a PSR. Tal-Or and Cohen (2016) state that during identification, “an audience member imagines him or herself to be that character, and, thus, is more likely to model characters, adopt their point of view, goals and emotions” (p. 34). In this way, identification is the next step beyond simply relating to a character and their experiences.

With PSRs now distinguished from PSIs, transportation, and identification, I will return to comparing PSRs with FTFRs. While the key difference between PSRs and FTFRs is a lack of reciprocity in the relationship, PSRs and FTFRs are not incomparable. Their similarities are greater than their differences.

Similarities Between PSRs and FTFRs

The lack of reciprocity in a PSR does not, according to Horton and Wohl (1956), create an impassable divide between PSRs and FTFRs. The authors describe PSRs as having “differences of degree, but not of kind” in comparison to their FTFR counterparts (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). The media viewer has to put in effort to maintain a PSR, much like anyone must put in effort to maintain an FTFR; thus, they are of the same kind. However, the types of effort involved in the two relationship types is of a different degree. The effort put into a PSR is the addition of fantasy to what Horton and Wohl (1956) refer to as a relational “framework.” Without fantasy, the relationship will cease to exist. FTFRs require two-way communication,

among other things – not fantasy. However, the framework of which Horton and Wohl (1956) speak is an additional key similarity between PSRs and FTFRs.

Formation

The framework of a relationship is the building blocks, the foundation, upon which further aspects of the relationship are built. The frameworks of a PSR and an FTFR are similar. According to Horton and Wohl (1956), the spectator participating in a PSR becomes engaged in much the same way that they begin a FTF friendship, through direct observation and interpretation which over time develops into a “shared” history and a sense of knowing the personality. This claim of foundational similarity has been corroborated in additional research (Cohen, 1997; Cole & Leets, 1999; Frederick, Lim, Clavio, & Walsh, 2016; Kurtin et al., 2018; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Savage & Spence, 2014), some of which notably utilized uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) and attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1973).

Uncertainty reduction theory (URT) is an interpersonal communication theory used to explain the developmental process of a relationship (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Berger and Calabrese (1975) posited that relationships develop as relational partners learn more and become less uncertain of each other. This decreased uncertainty happens over a length of time and through multiple interactions, which in turn increases liking, which lastly leads to greater relationship intimacy. Because URT was designed for interpersonal FTFRs, successfully applying it to PSRs supports Horton and Wohl’s (1956) original claims. Two foundational studies applied URT to PSRs with television characters (Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

The goal of Rubin and McHugh's (1987) study was to explore to what extent the development of PSRs mirror that of FTFRs. To do so the authors tested several of Berger and Calabrese's (1975) original URT theorems. Rubin and McHugh (1987) hypothesized that increased exposure to a television character would lead to the development of PSRs with the character and increased attraction to that character. They also hypothesized attraction would be positively related to PSR formation and perceived importance of the PSR. Rubin and McHugh (1987) successfully linked PSR development to several of Berger and Calabrese's (1975) original theorems, finding PSRs related to attraction and perceived importance of the relationship. The lack of a clear connection in regards to length of exposure to the television character to development of a PSR was further explored and explained in a secondary study by Perse and Rubin (1989).

Also utilizing URT, Perse and Rubin (1989) focused on the length of time spent viewing the television character. Through their study, Perse and Rubin (1989) corroborated Rubin and McHugh's (1987) finding that URT is a fitting model to explain the formation of PSRs. However, they additionally discovered that the amount of time spent viewing a television character indirectly (rather than directly) influences the formation and development of PSRs, as increased exposure is associated with increased attributional confidence or certainty, which is then associated with the development of PSRs (Perse & Rubin, 1989). While URT has been established as a fitting interpersonal theory when applied to PSRs, it is not the only theory which has utility in demonstrating the similarities between FTFRs and PSRs.

The decade following the original works on PSRs and URT saw an exploration of the use of attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1973) in PSR research. In short, attachment theory hypothesizes that repeated experiences with caregivers and other important figures leads

people to develop relatively stable patterns of relationship formation (Bowlby, 1973). Due to having different experiences with caregivers, individuals develop different attachment styles, classified by Ainsworth (1978) as secure, ambivalent, and avoidant. Secure individuals are characterized by having received the appropriate attention and care from caregivers while ambivalent individuals are characterized by inconsistent caregiver support, and, lastly, avoidant individuals are characterized by rejection from caregivers (Ainsworth, 1978). Each of these styles was later associated with specific relationship behaviors and relational outcomes. For example, secure individuals are more sociable (Duggan & Brennan, 1994) with longer lasting relationships (Feeney & Noller, 1990). Avoidant individuals are more hostile (Kobak & Sceery, 1988) and experience more loneliness (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), and ambivalent individuals are more anxious (Kobak & Sceery, 1988) and most negatively impacted by the end of a relationship (Feeney & Noller, 1990).

PSR researchers (Cohen, 1997; Cole & Leets, 1999) hypothesized and found support for the idea that the FTFR characteristics influenced by the attachment style of an individual would also explain the individual's PSR characteristics. For example, Cole and Leets (1999) found that individuals with an avoidant attachment style were least likely to form PSRs, mirroring those individuals' hesitancy to form FTFRs. Similarly, secure individuals were found to seek out PSRs in a time of need (Cole & Leets, 1999), just as they seek out FTFRs in times of need (Florian, Mikulincer, & Bucholtz, 1995). Cole and Leets' (1999) result from their study is that "a person's willingness to form a parasocial bond with his or her favorite TV personality is related to attachment beliefs" (p. 507). While research using multiple FTFR formation theories has thus shown the applicability of those theories to PSRs (and, thus, the similarity between the formation of FTFRs and PSRs), there are more relationship stages than just formation (Knapp, 1978).

Horton and Wohl's (1956) claim that PSRs are fundamentally similar to FTFRs has fueled PSR research beyond just the formation stage of a relationship and has explored the dissolution stage as well.

Breakup

While the end of a PSR can result from a multitude of factors – the end of a show, the death of a character or actor, or a media consumer's decision to end the relationship – what is investigated through the PSR break-up literature is how the results of a parasocial breakup compare to a FTF breakup (Cohen, 2003, 2004; DeGroot & Leith, 2018; Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Lather & Moyer-Gusé, 2011; Tal-Or, 2017). Cohen (2003) began this genre of PSR study by investigating age and sex expectations on parasocial breakups. He hypothesized there would not be sex differences in responses to PSR breakups but did hypothesize differences in age, with teens having stronger responses than adults to PSR breakups. While Cohen (2003) found support for both hypotheses, it is unclear from what literature he made these hypotheses, making claims of similarity to FTFRs impossible to make. However, Cohen (2003) does state that “like the breakup of social relationships, the end of parasocial relationships is a painful experience, which elicits symptoms similar to those that follow the loss of a friend” (p. 200).

Yet, Cohen's (2003) methodology does not seem to allow for this sort of conclusion, as participants were only asked to *imagine* losing a PSR partner and did not necessarily experience the breakup. Though Cohen's (2003) study does not allow for direct comparison to FTFRs, it was the catalyst for this new vein of PSR research. PSR breakup studies do differ from the earlier PSR formation studies which relied heavily on the use of theory to establish claims of similarity between FTFRs and PSRs. Thus, instead of classifying the breakup studies by theory, I have

arranged the breakup literature by the cause of the breakup to systematically investigate the similarities of FTFR breakups to PSR breakups.

One fairly common way a PSR can come to an end is through the inevitable end of a television show. Eyal and Cohen (2006) explored the impact of the end of *Friends* on individuals who had PSRs with characters from *Friends* and found similarities between PSR and FTFR breakups. Based on Simpson's (1987) study of the dissolution of romantic relationships, which found that level of distress is positively associated with the closeness of relational partners and the perceived social attractiveness of one's partner, Eyal and Cohen (2006) hypothesized that relationships intensity and commitment along with the perceived popularity of the character would be positively associated with breakup distress. However, while Eyal and Cohen's (2006) hypotheses were supported, they found the reactions caused by the loss of a PSR were similar to those caused by the loss of an FTFR but ultimately less stressful. What should be kept in mind with this finding is that when making comparisons between PSRs and FTFRs, due to advertising and marketing of television shows, viewers have advanced warning that they will be losing their relationship in a way people do not always have with FTFRs. In order to further explore the similarities and control for this possibility, Lather and Moyer-Gusé (2011) explored temporary and surprising parasocial break-ups.

In order to control for the prior knowledge of the end of a PSR, Lather and Moyer-Gusé (2011) examined parasocial breakup reactions to the unexpected temporary delay in television production due to the 2007-2008 writer's strike. Using Rubin, Perse, and Powell's (1985) parasocial interaction scale to measure relationship strength, Lather and Moyer-Gusé (2011) found that relationship strength predicted level of distress at the loss of the relationship, similar to what occurs in FTFRs described by Simpson (1987) and thus corroborating findings by Eyal

and Cohen (2006). In addition to corroborating Eyal and Cohen's (2006) findings, Lather and Moyer-Gusé (2011) also explored the similarities between PSR and FTFR breakups with regards to gender differences. Women in this study as well as in others (Cohen, 1997, 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006) displayed stronger PSRs than men. However, study participants did not experience any significant differences in their distress response to a PSR break-up (Lather & Moyer-Gusé, 2011). While this appears contradictory, as stronger relationships have shown to lead to greater distress, this finding furthers the argument that PSRs are similar to FTFRs. Interpersonal research has also found women to report having stronger relationships, yet they also have strong coping abilities, lowering distress responses (Helgeson, 1994; Simpson, 1987; Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998). In addition to the end of a show and a temporary hiatus, there is one more common way a PSR breakup occurs that has resulted in research comparing it to the end of FTFRs: death.

Depending on the genre, character death can be a common occurrence within a television show or a rare one. It might be a planned narrative within the show, a result of an actor leaving the show, or even a way of dealing with the tragic occurrence of the actor's real life death. No matter how it comes about, research has revealed that people grieve the death of their parasocial relational partner in similar ways to the deaths of face-to-face relational partners. Several studies have explored individuals' responses to the death of a beloved parasocial relational partner, fictional or celebrity (Cohen & Hoffner, 2016; DeGroot & Leith, 2018; Hoffner & Cohen, 2018; Meyrowitz, 1994; Sanderson & Cheong, 2010).

Of those studies, some have explored the role social media and social networking sites play in the grieving process of parasocial relationships (DeGroot & Leith, 2018; Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). Meyrowitz (1994) noted that in the death of a parasocial relational partner

typical methods of coping with grief such as attending a funeral or memorial service are not always available. DeGroot and Leith (2018) in particular explored an online Facebook memorial page to a fictional character from *House, M.D.*, Dr. Lawrence Kutner. The authors' analysis of the Facebook memorial page revealed that comments from grieving fans closely resembled memorial Facebook pages for the deaths of real people, containing expressions of "sadness, shock, missing, and love, which are emotions commonly described in memorial pages for friends and acquaintances who passed away" (DeGroot & Leith, 2018, p. 208). These are the same characteristic signs of grief displayed for real people (Bowlby, 1980). There was one more similarity noted between the grieving of character Dr. Kutner via online memorial and the grieving of face-to-face partners: the attempt to understand a sudden death by identifying the cause of death. Those on the Facebook group studied by DeGroot and Leith (2018) used the space to hypothesize why Kutner had died, a practice similar to what Roberts and Vidal (2000) observed in online memorials of real people.

Benefits of PSRs and FTFRs

While the structural aspects of PSRs and FTFRs are similar, so are the benefits associated with each type of relationship. Studies have examined the benefits forming PSRs can have on reducing stigma through examining participants' PSRs with media personalities who possess a potentially stigmatized identity, such as belonging to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community (Bond, 2018, 2020; Zhao, 2016), having obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) (Hoffner & Cohen, 2012, 2015), and having Bipolar Disorder (Wong, Lookadoo, & Nisbett, 2017). When exposed to characters with stigmatized identities, especially those who challenge the stereotypes associated with that stigma, participants began to see stigmatized individuals for more than their stigmatized identity; this finding is called the

parasocial contact hypothesis (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). Thus, if viewers form PSRs with these characters, they might also begin to view people with stigmatized identities more favorably. This stigma and stereotype reduction through PSRs is similar to the benefits of exposure to stigmatized individuals in FTFRs (Couture & Penn, 2003).

While stigma reduction in the general population would benefit those with a stigmatized identity through decreased discrimination, stigmatized individuals could benefit in an additional way as well. If the stigmatized individual also has a PSR with a character who possesses the same stigmatized identity, the viewer may directly benefit from the relationship as the character might affect their self-perception of their identity and in turn help them cope with internalized self-stigma and enhance feelings of belonging (Hoffner & Cohen, 2012). Enhancing feelings of belonging is yet another benefit of PSRs.

In his chapter on PSRs and wellbeing, Hartmann (2016) argues that belonging is a fundamental human need characterized by pleasant, relational social interactions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) which can be fulfilled in part by PSRs. Several studies support Hartmann's argument. First, PSRs might be beneficial to individuals in moments where belonging is compromised, such as after a fight with a relational partner, as individuals can turn to a PSR partner as a reminder of belonging (Derrick et al., 2008; Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009; Gardner, Pickett, & Knowles, 2005). Gardner and colleagues termed this phenomenon "social snacking" (p. 232). Though Iannone, McCarty, Branch, and Kelly (2018) do not use the terminology of social snacking, they describe a similar finding, noting that people who have an increased need to belong often turn to Twitter to seek out and establish PSRs to fulfill their belonging needs. Lastly, PSRs can increase feelings of belonging in individuals with low self-esteem. Derrick and colleagues (2008) compared individuals with low self-esteem before and

after being exposed to either a PSR partner or a celebrity with whom they did not have a PSR. The authors found that thinking of a PSR partner led participants to feel closer to their ideal versions of themselves than the participants who did not think of a PSR partner.

Given all the similarities between PSRs and FTFRs discussed above, including in formation, dissolution, and benefits of the relationship, it is not a leap to imagine that PSRs might be similar to FTFRs in additional, unexplored ways.. It is important to extend research of PSRs to include concepts more often studied in FTFRs, due to the similarity between PSRs and FTFRs. One such concept is social support. However, before moving on to social support literature, I must address the proposed difference in PSRs and FTFRs.

Proposed Differences in PSRs and FTFRs

While I have, thus far, explored research in similarities between PSRs and FTFRs sprouting from Horton and Wohl's (1956) original claims of similarity, the pair also hypothesized one major difference between PSRs and FTFRs which has spawned research as well: the proposed compensatory nature of PSRs. While making the claim that PSRs are fundamentally similar to FTFRs, the pair also hypothesized conditions which would make an individual more likely to engage in PSR formation. Though conceding that anyone can form a PSR as a healthy complement to FTFRs, Horton and Wohl (1956) advanced that PSR formation is favorable to "the socially isolated, the socially inept, the aged and invalid, the timid and rejected" (p. 223), as these individuals lack FTFRs. This claim has spawned a plethora of research to date (Canary & Spitzberg, 1993; Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005; Cohen, 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Levy, 1979; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Tsao, 1997; Wang, Fink, & Cai, 2008).

There are two main hypotheses describing who is likely to form PSRs: the *deficiency paradigm* and the *global-use paradigm*. Tsao (1996) defines the deficiency paradigm as “assum[ing] that parasocial interaction acts as a surrogate for face-to-face interpersonal relationships and see[ing] it as catering to individuals who, because of environmental or psychological limitations, lack such relationships” (p. 89). This paradigm aligns with Horton and Wohl’s (1956) original presumption that the “socially inept” are better suited to PSR formation. The competing hypothesis, the global-use paradigm, “assumes that parasocial interaction is a more universal experience in which all individuals may readily engage, regardless of whether they are satisfied with their orthosocial relationships” (Tsao, 1996, p. 89).

Many studies have tested the deficiency paradigm (Canary & Spitzberg, 1993; Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005; Cohen, 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Levy, 1979; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin et al., 1985; Tsao, 1996; Wang et al., 2008). However, these studies have been unable to support the deficiency paradigm and, in some cases, even provide direct support against the deficiency paradigm. One of the commonly investigated “environmental or psychological limitations” (Tsao, 1996, p. 89) hypothesized to lead to increased PSRs, yet unsupported in the literature, is loneliness (Canary & Spitzberg, 1993; Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005; Rubin et al., 1985; Wang et al., 2008). For example, Rubin et al. (1985) investigated loneliness as a predictor of PSRs with local television news personalities. Using the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980) and the Parasocial Interaction Scale (Rubin et al., 1985), the authors did not find support for a linkage between loneliness and parasocial interaction. However, Rubin and colleagues used a sample of college students who, as a population, did not demonstrate high levels of loneliness. This led to a suggestion of investigating PSRs in a different sample, such as the elderly, which was later investigated by Chory-Assad and Yanen (2005). However, Chory-

Assad and Yanen (2005) were also unable to support loneliness as a predictor of PSRs. While the literature does not support loneliness as a predictor of PSRs under the deficiency paradigm, there is limited support for loneliness leading to increased distress after a PSR breakup (Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

While loneliness appears to be the most popularly studied “deficiency” under the deficiency paradigm, other psychological characteristics have been investigated with respect to PSR formation, including low empathy, low extraversion, and high neuroticism. However, individuals with these characteristics “exhibited not stronger, and in some instances an even weaker, tendency towards parasocial interaction than those with higher empathy, higher extraversion, and lower neuroticism” (Tsao, 1996, p. 104). This research directly contradicts the deficiency paradigm, as individuals who would fall under Horton and Wohl’s (1956) classification as socially inept are *less* likely rather than more likely to form PSRs. This is not the only study to directly contradict the deficiency paradigm. Previously discussed studies utilizing attachment theory such as Cole and Leets (1999) and Cohen (2004) revealed that individuals who have a harder time developing FTFRs are less, rather than more, likely to form PSRs.

Having demonstrated that PSRs are fundamentally similar to FTFRs in their formation, dissolution, and benefits and refuted some of their proposed differences, I argue that PSR research can and should be extended to topics typically only discussed in non-PSR interpersonal relationships, such as social support. I will now introduce the concept of social support and relational regulation theory, which I will use to link PSRs and social support.

Social Support

Social support, defined as “behaviors that, whether directly or indirectly, communicate to an individual that she or he is valued and cared for by others” (Barnes & Duck, 1994, p. 176) is a

broad concept which includes several different types of support. To understand how PSRs might provide people with social support, it is necessary to understand the types and associated characteristics.

Types and Characteristics

Social support behaviors have been categorized by several researchers (Cutrona & Suhr, 1994; House, 1981). However, there were originally four main social support behaviors (House, 1981): *emotional support*, *instrumental support*, *informational support*, and *appraisal support*. Cutrona and Suhr (1994) define emotional support as expressions of caring, concern, empathy, and sympathy; instrumental support (also termed *tangible support*) as the giving of goods and services; and informational support as advice, factual input, and feedback. Appraisal support, later *esteem support*, is defined by Holmstrom (2015) as “social support that is intended to enhance how another person feels about him or herself and his or her attributes, abilities, and accomplishments” (p. 282). In addition to the four original types of social support behaviors, a fifth is now commonly included: *social network support*. Broadly described as companionship, social network support includes “ongoing relationships maintained even when no crisis exists” (du Pré, 2010, p. 169).

The types of social support may look different in a PSR context, as a PSR partner cannot for example, give material aid. For this reason, it is helpful to consider other classifications of social support behaviors. Cutrona and Suhr (1994) designated two larger categories of social support: *action-facilitating support* and *nurturing support*. Action-facilitating support is supported directed at helping someone achieve a goal and includes instrumental and informational support. On the other hand, nurturing support is support meant to increase one’s emotional well-being and includes emotional and social network support. Esteem support has the

potential to fall into either categorization, as the reassurance function of esteem support can help someone achieve a goal or enhance their well-being (Cutrona & Suhr, 1994). Given PSR partners are not physically available to provide instrumental support, it is likely PSRs provide nurturing support rather than action-facilitating support. However, PSR partners can still provide informational support. In the case of PSRs, I argue informational support is similar to esteem support, in that it can be action-facilitating or nurturing support. Information can also serve as reassurance benefiting emotional well-being.

Lastly, social support can also be considered broadly as *enacted support* or *perceived support*. Goldsmith (2004) defines enacted support as “what has or is occurring” and perceived support as “what is generally available or might occur” (p. 14). PSRs can serve in either an enacted or perceived support role. Individuals can receive support, such as emotional or informational support from their PSR partner, and they can also perceive their PSR partner is available to give support. Because a PSR partner is always available, unlike a real provider, perceived support might be higher for PSR partners. While the communication perspective to social support focuses on enacted support (Goldsmith, 2004), I argue both conceptions are needed to understand PSRs.

It is important to note that while I am arguing PSRs can provide social support – both enacted and perceived – I am not arguing that all PSRs are by necessity supportive, just as not all FTFRs are supportive. Some studies have even considered PSRs with disliked characters (Bernhold, 2019; Jennings & Alper, 2016). Jennings and Alper (2016) use the terms *positive PSR* and *negative PSR* to differentiate between PSRs that are friendly (positive) and PSRs that are unfriendly (negative). I would not expect negative PSRs to offer support. However, there is nothing to suggest positive PSRs have to be supportive either. PSRs could just be instances of

companionship, which is not generally considered social support (Rook, 1987). Similarly, while PSRs can offer support, it is likely characters with whom one does not have a PSR can also offer support as social support can occur outside of established FTRs, especially in online support group contexts (Chung, 2014; Hu, Bell, Kravitz, & Orrange., 2012; Stana & Miller, 2019; Walther & Boyd, 2002).

The Normative Approach

Just as there are different types of social support behaviors, there are also different traditions of studying social support. This study uses a communication approach, also known as the normative approach (Goldsmith, 2004). Whereas a sociological or psychological perspective looks at social interactions as support and perceived support respectively, the communication approach looks at enacted support or “verbal and nonverbal behaviors intended to provide or seek help” (MacGeorge, Feng, & Burleson, 2011, p. 323). Burleson, Albrecht, Goldsmith, and Sarason (1994) further describe the communication perspective as “studying the *messages* through which people both seek and express support; studying the *interactions* in which supportive messages are produced and interpreted; and studying the *relationships* that are created by and contextualize the supportive interactions in which people engage” (p.xviii). The communication approach to social support thus centers social support as a communication process. It also, as implied in the above quote, looks specifically at messages which seek or express support occurring in what is known as *troubles talk*. Troubles talk is conversation specifically centered around troubles or problems for which one seeks support or for which another provides support (Goldsmith, 2004).

There are several assumptions to the normative approach to social support. The first assumption is that “enacted support is meaningful action” (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 31).. A

supportive action is not supportive by nature but rather is supportive because of the meaning interactants assign to the action. A communication process of interpretation and evaluation determines the meaning of supportive actions. This leads well into the second assumption, which states, “there are social bases for shared meaning” (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 34). Goldsmith (2004) expects similarities in interpreting messages because of social understandings which have been communicated to individuals throughout their lives. Goldsmith (2004) identifies two ways this occurs: through *social practices* and *social processes*. Social practices are “recurrent meaningful actions recognized and imbued with value by a social group” (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 38), such as language patterns including using the language of apology (“I’m sorry”) to show sympathy. Social processes are described as “the kinds of framing and coordinating moves in which we engage as we are going along in a conversation” (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 39). Goldsmith gives examples such as asking if the conversation partner wants advice or clarifying our intention to be helpful rather than hurtful.

The third assumption is that enacted support is situated (Goldsmith, 2004). Actions do not occur in a vacuum but are predated by other actions which may lead to a different understanding of one relationship than another or to a different understanding of the current situation. How one understands a current situation, environment, or relationship will impact how that person interprets and evaluates enacted support given during that time. For example, advice from a relational partner who has expressed disapproval of one’s actions may be viewed as condescending rather than supportive. The fourth assumption Goldsmith (2004) makes is that enacted support is rhetorical, meaning that enacted support is purposeful and that the support itself must be designed to convey that purpose given the understanding of the relationship between relational partners. This assumption situates much of the insights the communication

perspective offers which are not seen in the sociological or psychological traditions. By focusing on the message and interaction of support, the communication approach allows researchers to determine what makes a supportive message supportive.

One way of categorizing messages in order to understand their supportive nature is to determine the level of verbal person centeredness (VPC). Burleson (2008) defines person centeredness as “the extent to which messages explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, legitimize, and contextualize the distressed other’s feelings and perspective” (p. 2). Rack, Burleson, Bodie, Holmstrom, and Servaty-Seib (2008) investigated what aspects of a message, including person centeredness, were the most helpful in assisting individuals in coping with grief. Participants in the study rated messages previously coded for level of person centeredness by Servaty-Seib and Burleson (2007) in terms of helpfulness. Participants rated messages higher in person centeredness as significantly more helpful in coping with grief. Rack and colleagues (2008) study replicated the findings of a previous study conducted by Servaty-Seib and Burleson (2007).

However, messages are not just verbal; they contain and are contextualized by nonverbal behavior which can also influence the supportiveness of the message. This nonverbal behavior is referred to as nonverbal immediacy (NVI). Jones and Guerrero (2001) define NVI as “behaviors such as smiling, eye gaze, and direct body orientation, which reflect empathy, interpersonal warmth, and psychological closeness” (p. 568). Andersen (1999) studied how NVI behaviors foster a connection between relational partners, and Jones and Guerrero (2001) applied that knowledge to emotional support and comfort. Through manipulating levels of VPC and NVI using confederates, Jones and Guerrero (2001) tested what combination of VPC and NVI resulted the best support evaluation. In general, they concluded that NVI and VPC must be considered together, stating “people who use highly person-centered messages might not

necessarily be perceived as providing the best support unless they also use high levels of NVI, and vice versa” (Jones & Guerrero, 2001, p. 587).

In addition to VPC and NVI, the content of specific types of messages, such as advice, have been evaluated to determine what makes better, more supportive advice. Feng and Burleson (2008) investigated the impact of explicit efficacy, feasibility, and the absence of limitations on the evaluation of advice messages. Through manipulating the explicitness of the three measures in advice messages, Feng and Burleson (2008) found that advice which explicitly addressed efficacy, feasibility, and limitations was more positively received than less explicit advice.

These are three examples of how the communication perspective can be used to interrogate what makes a message supportive. When one considers everything that goes into the making of a message, including nonverbal and verbal behaviors, the communication perspective allows for an abundance of research into supportive communication. However, despite tackling social support from a different perspective, research from the sociological and psychological traditions has still been influential to the study of social support. What is agreed upon across the psychological, sociological, and communication traditions is that social support has benefits, particularly health benefits. The physical and mental health benefits gained from supportive interactions makes social support an important phenomenon to study from all perspectives.

Benefits of Social Support

The physical benefits of social support are remarkable. Working from the sociological tradition, Berkman and Syme (1979) used data from a 1965 survey and a 1974 follow-up survey to investigate the impact of social networks on mortality rate. After assigning participants a score based on social connections, the researchers compared mortality rates for participants within the nine years between surveys to participants’ social network scores. This comparison revealed a

significant difference in mortality rates between the least and most socially connected, with the least socially connected having the higher mortality rate. Berkman and Syme (1979) tested several potential confounding variables between social network scores and mortality rate, including: sickness at time of original survey (participants could have been too ill to socialize), socioeconomic status, health practices (smoking, obesity, alcohol consumption, and physical activity), and health services. However, the difference in mortality rate by social network score were not explained by any of the tested confounding variables. Berkman and Syme's findings support the idea that social ties have a strong and important impact on physical health. Physical health benefits of social support have also been examined as a result of the buffering of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). In addition to these physical benefits of social support, scholars have also examined the benefits of social support on mental and emotional health.

Important to the conversation of social support benefits (whether perceived or enacted support) is the acknowledgement of the similarities in benefits of social support and benefits of PSRs. I have detailed PSRs' ability to manage and mitigate stigma, yet social support also offers stigma management tools (Chang & Bazarova, 2016; Crowley, High, & Thomas, 2019; Hinck et al., 2019). Hinck and colleagues (2019) analyzed messages posted to a social support site for individuals with incarcerated loved ones. The researchers argue that individuals with incarcerated loved ones often experience stigma by association, as many people in their pre-existing networks will disapprove of their relationship and places to discuss and seek support for their experiences diminish (Hinck et al., 2019). The analysis of the social support site revealed users of the site specifically visited the site seeking to manage stigma. One of the most common types of social support sought was "requests for personal or relational advice, including requests for suggestions on coping mechanisms for managing others' rejection or judgement concerning

courtesy stigma” (Hinck et al., 2019, p. 595). The use of online social support site may be a way of reducing support gaps, as support gaps can lead to increased stigma perception (Crowley et al., 2019).

Also similar to the benefits of PSRs, social support can lead to a higher sense of belonging (Davis, 2017). Davis (2017) explored the impact of perceived support on the mental health of college students by measuring participants perceived social support, sense of belonging, emotional regulation, aggression, binge eating behaviors, and depressive symptoms. In addition to finding perceived social support can influence an individual’s sense of belonging, Davis (2017) found evidence that perceived social support is linked to lower levels of aggression and less instances of binge eating. Given the similarities between PSR and social support research for stigma management and sense of belonging, it is possible that the mechanism by which PSR offers benefits is through social support.

Additional benefits of social support on mental and emotional health include reduced loneliness and depression (Segrin, 2003) and uncertainty management (Brashers et al., 2004). Segrin (2003) investigated perceived available social support’s effects on loneliness and depression. Participants completed surveys measuring symptoms of loneliness and depression (Beck & Beck, 1972; Russell et al., 1980) as well as scales measuring social support from friends, family, and romantic partners (House, Kahn, McLeod, & Williams, 1985; Procidano & Heller, 1983). Segrin’s (2003) analysis of participant response revealed perceived social support reduces symptoms of loneliness and depression. Brashers et al. (2004) conducted focus groups with adults living with HIV/AIDS and concluded social support helped participants manage the uncertainty of living with a chronic disease. Given that social support has such important physical and mental health benefits for those who receive it, extending research into where

people go and who they turn to in order to find support is important, even if the answer is fictional characters on television. Relational regulation theory offers a framework to explore that possibility.

Relational Regulation Theory

Relational regulation theory (RRT) was developed by Lakey and Orehek (2011) to further explore the connection between perceived support and mental health as well as differentiating between social and personality influences on support. Social processes would reflect a learned understanding of support (see Goldsmith, 2004) while personality influences would demonstrate a personal preference of support (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). This is the key to understanding Lakey and Orehek's terminology of relational. The pair defines relational as "when a provider elicits affect, action, or thought in a recipient that is not characteristic of how the recipient typically responds to other providers and is not characteristic of what the provider typically elicits in other recipients" (Lakey & Orehek, 2011, p. 3). Thus, the perception of a provider as supportive is due to personality influences. The next key definition in RRT is that of perceived support.

Perceived support is defined as "recipients' perceptions that quality enacted support is available," (Lakey & Orehek, 2011, p. 1) whereas enacted support comprises actions taken to support an individual. While this theory appears at odds with the normative approach, given RRTs focus on perceived rather than enacted support, I argue the two frameworks can coexist. One of RRT's key eight principles states that the judgement of perceived support is based, in part, on experiences with enacted support (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). While RRT assumes a judgement of a provider's supportiveness can be made without ever receiving enacted support from the provider, it maintains the possibility that upon eventually receiving enacted support

from the provider, the recipient's perception of the provider's supportiveness can be altered (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). Thus, if a previously judged "supportive" provider fails to provide quality support in a time of need, the provider might be judged as unsupportive moving forward.

Yet, RRT's focus on perceived support is crucial for a study of PSRs. If the foundational understanding of a PSR is having a perceived relationship with a partner with whom one cannot interact (Horton & Wohl, 1956), a PSR partner cannot give enacted support in an intentional manner (see discussion of characteristics and types of social support). However, according to RRT, recipients can still make judgements of the PSR partner's supportiveness (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). Importantly, Lakey and Orehek (2011) also consider the possibility of RRT being applied to fictional characters in their seminal work, stating that quasi relational regulation occurs "from interacting with or thinking about activities, symbolic people, ideas, or objects (p. 4). While Lakey and Orehek (2011) do not use the term "parasocial relationship," instead opting for *symbolic people*, they define symbolic people as TV characters, celebrities, and people in photographs or on video. Thus, RRT contains the possibility of PSR partners as support providers. RRT's ability to tackle PSRs and its connections to the normative approach to social support are also evident in its other key principles.

Principles of RRT

The first principle of RRT is that affect, action, and thought are primarily regulated through social interaction (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). RRT assumes social interaction benefits mental health through the concept of regulation. Individuals' affect fluctuates, and people do not experience the same emotions or thoughts at all times. When someone becomes sad, something then occurs to regulate their emotions and improve their mood. RRT presumes social interaction is this intervening factor to regulate affect (Lakey & Orehek, 2011).

However, social interaction need not be a face-to-face process. According to RRT, simply *thinking* about a provider can count as social interaction and influence affect (Lahey & Orehek, 2011). For example, several studies testing principles of RRT have asked participants to think about a provider rather than interact directly with that provider and then to rate the resulting affect and perceived supportiveness. Woods, Lahey, and Sain (2016) asked participants to rate affect elicited by their mother, father, and closest peer without interacting with that individual, and Lahey, Vander Molen, Fles, and Andrews (2016) used the same approach when asking participants to rate affect elicited by their roommates. If social interaction need not be face-to-face to elicit affect, then thinking about or viewing a PSR partner should have the potential to regulate affect, action, and thought.

The second principle of RRT is that the process of regulation through social interaction happens primarily relationally, meaning different providers will better suit different recipients (Lahey & Orehek, 2011). This echoes social support as understood from the normative approach. Previous discussions of work by Rack and colleagues (2008) and Feng and Burleson (2008) illuminated what makes a good support provider. Fles and Lahey (2017) also investigated traits of supportive providers, and while participants (in this case, roommates rating each other's supportiveness and personality traits) agreed good support providers were agreeable, extroverted, and emotionally stable, disagreement on which participant/roommate was the most supportive still existed, supporting the notion that regulation is relational.

The third principle describes the aforementioned social interactions in which relational regulation takes place as primarily *ordinary* (Lahey & Orehek, 2011). Therefore, relational regulation is a day-to-day occurrence and is not just relevant to major events or stressful events. This aspect of RRT does diverge from the normative approach's focus on trouble talk

(Goldsmith, 2004). However, while Lakey and Orehek (2011) view ordinary interactions as the primary site of relational regulation, the authors do not exclude the possibility of troubles talk regulating affect. Allowing for regulation in ordinary interactions, however, is beneficial to the use of RRT in studying PSRs. In this context, the viewing of television and the participation in PSRs is ordinary social interaction.

The fourth principle further elaborates on the authors' idea of ordinary interactions contributing to regulation, stating "relational regulation occurs primarily through conversation and shared activities that elaborate on recipients' cognitive representations of relationships and quasi relationships" (Lakey & Orehek, 2011, p. 7). To simplify, when individuals engage in or discuss something they enjoy, they experience favorable affect. By enjoying that activity with a partner or by continuing a conversation, the positive affect is afforded the opportunity to magnify. Under this principle then, watching television with a friend and discussing the show could increase affect and provide relational regulation.

The fifth principle, as previously discussed, states that perceived support is based on ordinary social interaction as well as past experiences with enacted support. The sixth principle claims that relational regulation partners, shared activities, and conversations are always shifting as people attempt to find the person or activity which best helps them to feel good and regulate affect (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). This ties into the notion that enacted support still plays a role in RRT. If a poorly executed enacted support experience changes a recipients perspective on the supportiveness of a provider, they may no longer approach that person to regulate affect. Likewise, Lakey and Orehek (2011) provide the example of channel surfing to find a symbolic provider to effectively regulate affect. If the connection does not exist with a character, a viewer will not stay long enough to form a relationship.

The remaining two principles focus on RRT in practice. Principle seven recommends the use of relational regulation in social support interventions, and principle eight states having more and diverse relationships increases chance of effective regulation (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). However, principle eight does not conflate quantity with quality. In this respect, it is in line with the normative approach (Goldsmith, 2004). Principle eight highlights, again, the presumption that regulation is relational and that relational regulation partners are ever changing. By having access to diverse partners, recipients are more likely to find quality interactions which better regulate their affect than if they had a limited pool from which to choose. This is an additional area of RRT which explains the use of PSRs in affect regulations as television offers an abundance of unique individuals to test as relational regulation partners.

Tests of RRT

The literature, including tests of RRT (Andrews, 2011; Hubbard, 2015; Lakey et al., 2016; Woods et al., 2016), interpersonal social support research (Dyregrov, Kristensen, Dyregrov, 2018; Robbins, Karan, Lopez, & Weihs, 2018), and organizational social support research (Gurtoo, 2019; Rodwell & Munro, 2013), supports RRT's eight key principles. Research by Lakey and colleagues (2016) tested the relationship between ordinary social interaction, perceived support, and resulting affect. Three distinct groups participated in the study: marines, roommates, and strangers. In the case of the marines and roommates, the participants relied on shared history with each other to complete the measures, but the strangers were paired and instructed to have a conversation via instant messenger. Participants rated their team members (marines), roommates, or partners (strangers) on perceived support (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1991), elicited positive and negative affect (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), and quality of ordinary conversation (Lakey & Sain, 2017).

As the studies of the marines and the roommates included groups of participants rating each other rather than pairs, the researchers were able to determine perceived supportiveness and quality of ordinary conversation were primarily relational (i.e. roommates and marines did not agree on who was most supportive in their groups). There was also a positive relationship between perceived supportiveness and quality of ordinary conversation with higher positive affect, indicating better support and conversation elicited positive feeling. As RRT predicts this affect regulation was largely due to participating in ordinary conversation, Lakey and colleagues controlled for ordinary conversation to see if positive affect would be reduced. It was significantly reduced, indicating ordinary conversation did regulate positive affect in their experiment. However, RRT hypothesizes that ordinary social interaction should reduce negative affect as well as increase positive affect (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). This was not supported by the study, as perceived support was linked to lower negative affect but not ordinary conversation (Lakey et al., 2016).

However, in a similar study where participants rated their parents and closest peer for the same measures, lower negative affect was linked to ordinary conversation (Woods et al., 2016). The difference in the results of the two studies suggests that RRT is better suited to predictions of positive affect rather than negative affect. This would mean that ordinary conversation is more likely to increase positive feelings than it is to reduce negative ones. This could have implications for the motivations of interacting with a PSR partner, as it might be the case that PSRs amplify positive feelings rather than negating negative ones. In addition, two further studies garnered similar results for the relationship between ordinary social interaction, perceived support, and affect (Andrews, 2011; Hubbard, 2015).

Also utilizing roommates and including similar measures as earlier studies, Hubbard (2015) found perceived support and ordinary conversation were primarily relational (i.e., roommates rated each other differently) and that unusually supportive providers were linked to higher levels of ordinary conversation, positive affect, and perceived similar as well as lower levels of negative affect. The additional insight which links supportiveness with similarity bodes well for the use of RRT to investigate PSRs, as PSRs are often formed with those whom individuals perceive as similar to their ideal selves (Derrick et al., 2008).

RRT in Interpersonal and Organizational Settings

In addition to studies testing its principles, RRT has also been used in interpersonal and organizational settings. Social support research has often explored how married couples deal with life-altering events, and RRT literature is no different. In a naturalistic observation study of couples experiencing breast cancer, Robbins and colleagues (2018) found that ordinary conversations (conversations not about cancer or related topics) were associated with the breast cancer patient's psychological adjustment, measured as decreased symptoms of depression and increased satisfaction with life. This finding supports RRT's claim that affect and, thus, mental health are regulated through ordinary conversation (Lakey & Orehek, 2011).

In a study of how bereaved parents used their social networks for support, Dyregrov and colleagues (2018) found a relationship between providers eliciting negative thinking and more negative affect, and those providers perceived as less supportive. For example, some participants viewed providers' attempts at support as insincere and, thus, felt negatively. This demonstrates RRT's claim that enacted support can affect perceived support (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). In addition, the study found support for another principle of RRT. The researchers found that the bereaved parents sought to optimally regulate affect by "shift[ing] between conversations,

interaction partners, and activities” (Dyregrov et al., 2018, p. 9). If a provider was viewed as insincere in their support, they were rejected by the parent. This speaks to the dynamic nature of relational regulation (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). Interestingly, not all who offered support to the bereaved parents were individuals with whom the parents had an FTFR. As the parents in the study lost their children through a publicized terrorist attack, official messages of sympathy were released by members of government and other public figures. The bereaved parents still viewed these symbolic providers as supportive, confirming the potential for individuals outside a recipient’s immediate social network to create a positive impact on recipient’s affect and mental health (Dyregrov et al., 2018).

In organizational settings, RRT has proved a fruitful framework. In one study, perceived support from employers was investigated in conjunction with occupational prestige for women domestic workers in India (Gurtoo, 2019). Gurtoo (2019) found that the notion of occupational prestige was regulated by ordinary social interactions with an employer, such as receiving tea or coffee in their home or even being treated politely. These increased feelings of prestige corresponded with higher perceived support from an employer and better occupational well-being.

Additionally, RRT has been used as a framework for examining social support and organizational justice for nurses (Rodwell & Munro, 2013). Researchers measured job demands, job control, social support, and organization justice effects on job satisfaction, psychological distress, and depression. The study found that support from supervisors and support outside the workplace significantly predicted psychological distress and depression. The use of multiple sources of support suggested that the nurses tried to optimally regulate affect with more and diverse providers, as RRT suggests (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). However, the study did not

elaborate on the nature of the conversations between providers and nurses, and these conversations may have been troubles talk or ordinary conversation, as both are considered as ways to regulate affect under RRT's principles.

RRT and PSRs

As previously discussed, RRT is open to the reality that a support provider need not be an individual with whom a recipient has close, personal contact, but rather they can be a symbolic provider, such as an animal, object, or even a TV character (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). Lakey, Cooper, Cronin, and Whitaker (2014) tested the possibility of symbolic providers by comparing perceived supportiveness and affect from real providers and symbolic providers. This consisted of three studies. In the first study, participants rated real providers (mother, father, and closest peer) and symbolic providers (a celebrity to parallel their mother, father, and closest peer) on supportiveness, similarity to the participant, and affect elicited. The study found "virtually identical" results for symbolic and real providers, including that providers who elicited better affect were perceived as more supportive and that those providers were viewed as more similar to the participant (Lakey et al., 2014). Study one did not test whether supportiveness of symbolic providers was primarily relational, and, given that is the case for real providers (Lakey & Orehek, 2011), it was important to do so to establish the similarity between provider types.

Thus, the second study explored if supportiveness of providers is relational and if symbolic providers regulate affect. In this study, symbolic providers were three video interviews with Jane Goodall, I. M. Pei, and Jim Ryun, for whom perceived supportiveness and elicited affect were rated by participants. Researchers then purposefully lowered participants' affect by playing unpleasant music (see Eich & Metcalfe, 1989). Participants then either watched a control video (which had no effect on affect) or were afforded the opportunity to rewatch one of the

three videos of the symbolic providers and repeated the measures for affect. Participants were expected to regulate their affect by choosing to rewatch the provider they rated most favorably after the first viewing. This occurred significantly more often than not, demonstrating symbolic providers are capable of regulation. The rating of the providers also demonstrated the regulation was relational (Lakey et al., 2014).

Lastly, the third study sought to determine how symbolic providers elicit affect and perceived support, given recipients interactions with symbolic providers differ from those of real providers, as recipients cannot engage in ordinary conversation with symbolic providers. Thus, Lakey and colleagues (2014) had participants view video conversations between a designated symbolic provider and another person. Participants then rated the affect elicited by the conversation, the supportiveness of the symbolic provider, and their perceived similarity to the symbolic provider. Due to the differences in conversational topics shown across video clips, participants also answered questions regarding what they like to talk about in conversations. This study again showed that perceptions of symbolic providers are relational. Unique to this study, however, researchers found that conversational preferences (what a participant enjoys talking about) were linked to which provider the participant found most supportive, elicited the best affect, and was perceived as most similar to the participant.

Most importantly, Lakey and colleague's (2014) study contributed to RRT by supporting the role of symbolic providers in relational regulation and extending the role of ordinary conversation in relational regulation. The finding that observing symbolic providers engaging in ordinary conversation with others had similar benefits as actually engaging in ordinary conversation with a real provider suggests that PSRs play a role in the provision of social support and relational regulation. However, more work is needed to be done to establish the role of PSRs

in social support, as the symbolic providers utilized in Lakey and colleague's (2014) study only consisted of parasocial interaction (PSI).

As discussed earlier, PSIs and PSRs are different concepts. A PSI occurs only in the moment of viewing when a viewer feels as if the personality is talking directly to them, whereas a PSR extends beyond the moment of viewing, with viewers continuing to feel the relationship outside of a single parasocial interaction (Hartmann, 2016). This is important in the context of RRT, as RRT claims simply thinking about a provider can regulate affect (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). Thinking about a provider outside of an interaction would indicate the presence of a PSR rather than a parasocial interaction. In the context of the previously discussed study by Lakey and colleagues (2014), the distinction between parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions gains further importance.

The authors draw the conclusion "symbolic providers seem to have some advantages over real providers ... when a symbolic provider becomes tedious, one can merely turn the provider off without consequence" (Lakey et al., 2014, p. 417). Yet, as demonstrated by the parasocial breakup literature discussed earlier (Cohen, 2003, 2004; DeGroot & Leith, 2018; Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Tal-Or, 2017), there are consequences to losing a parasocial relationship—consequences which are similar to losing a FTFR. Thus, PSRs should be compared to FTFRs to determine similarities in relational regulation. It is not enough to test symbolic providers through parasocial interaction, as parasocial relationships function much more similarly to FTFRs. Parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships should also be compared to determine if there is a difference in their ability to regulate affect.

RQ1: How do participants report using their parasocial relationship partner for social support?

Lurking and Vicarious Support

To return to Lakey and colleague's (2014) assertion that simply viewing a symbolic provider engage in ordinary conversation has benefits for relational regulation, there is additional evidence in social support literature that this is true. The internet has often been studied as a site of social support. RRT has been used to explore virtual support on Facebook (Knowles, 2013) and other social support research has looked at online support groups (Chung, 2014; Hu, Bell, Kravitz, & Orrange, 2012; Stana & Miller, 2019; Walther & Boyd, 2002). Most relevant to symbolic providers and observing ordinary conversation is the body of research exploring social support and *lurking*.

Lurking is defined as “reading messages posted by others on electronic spaces, without also posting one’s own messages or in any way signaling one’s vicarious observations” (Walther & Boyd, 2002). Lurkers can still receive social support benefits despite not engaging in conversation themselves. Instead, they observe others’ conversations (though more often troubles talk than ordinary conversation, given the explicit purpose of online support groups). While studies comparing lurkers to active participants have found active online participants perceive more support (Mo & Coulson, 2010; Setoyama, Yamazaki, & Namayama, 2011), the research finds no major differences between lurkers and posters with regards to loneliness, depression, optimism, being informed, self-esteem, and acceptance (Mo & Coulson, 2010; van Uden-Kraan, Drossaert, Taal, Seydal, & Van de Laar, 2008).

Additionally, in a study conducted by Han, Hou, Kim, and Gustafson (2014), breast cancer patients reported on their usage of an online social support group over the course of three months. The researchers categorized participants by how they engaged with the social support site. *Posters* were “women who wrote at least two messages during the study period” and *lurkers*

“read messages but did not write at least two messages” (Han et al., 2014, p. 915). Participants completed measures of quality of life and support before beginning the program, with follow-ups at six weeks and at three months. Interestingly, after three months of lurking or posting, lurkers benefited more than posters. The researchers hypothesized several reasons for lurkers increased, albeit delayed, benefits. It is possible that by not posting, lurkers were able to spend that time reading other messages, which could answer questions they had and just did not post. They also speculated that the familiarity with the group lurkers gained by reading led them to develop a sense of efficacy, caring, and attachment (Walther, Pingree, Hawkins, & Buller, 2005).

Similar to lurking and symbolic providers is the concept of *vicarious support*. Vicarious support is described in two different ways. First, vicarious support can include imagining what a real support provider who is not currently available might say in a supportive interaction, such as a child imagining their parents when experiencing homesickness (Rollins, 2010). On the other hand, vicarious support can also include watching someone else, such as a stranger or a television character, experience the same or similar situation which has left the observer feeling in need of support. For example, Kreuter and colleagues (2007) argued that a woman could receive vicarious social support by watching a breast cancer survivor recount her story of battling the illness. Olson (2018) made a similar claim while advocating for the importance of accurate disability representation on television. According to Olson, the reality show *Born This Way*, which chronicles the lives of several individuals with Down syndrome, serves as vicarious support for parents of children with Down syndrome, as the parents “can relate to the struggles, successes, and reality of living with a child or adult who has down syndrome” (pp. 60-61). Evident through the research on lurking and vicarious support, in addition to RRT’s inclusion of symbolic providers, is that social support research should extend beyond face-to-face interactions

to include the meaningful relationships support recipients foster with those outside their close social network.

Examining PSRs with RRT and the Normative Approach

While RRT is a psychological theory, it pairs well with a communication based approach to studying social support, especially in the contest of symbolic providers/parasocial relationships. First, while RRT engages with perceived support (Lakey & Orehek, 2011) and the normative approach with enacted support (Goldsmith, 2004), both conceptions of support are meaningful to studying PSR partners as support providers. Viewers can form a judgement of a PSR partner's supportiveness (perceived support) by observing the support the PSR partner gives to others (enacted support). While RRT is key to understanding the function of observation in social support (Lakey et al., 2014), it is the normative approach which researchers use to analyze what aspects of a message lead recipients to evaluate the message as supportive or not (Goldsmith, 2004). Used in combination, RRT and the normative approach can examine what about PSR partners and their interactions make them appear supportive, not only to other fictional characters, but to viewers. In this study, I investigate viewers' use of conversations between characters within *Supernatural* to make judgments of characters' supportiveness.

RQ₂: Which message qualities do participants view as supportive in their PSR partners' interactions with other characters?

Also previously discussed is the difference in RRT and the normative approach's conversational focus. While RRT primarily focuses on ordinary interaction (including ordinary conversation; Lakey & Orehek, 2011), the normative approach focuses on troubles talk (Goldsmith, 2004). RRT offers the possibility of considering both ordinary conversation *and* troubles talk. However, RRT has only been used to examine perceived support of symbolic

providers engaged in ordinary conversation (Lakey et al., 2014). I argue viewing a PSR partner engaged in both troubles talk and ordinary conversation can be supportive, yet current research does not indicate how the two different conversational types might differ in supportive nature within a PSR. Thus I ask the following research question:

RQ3: What differences exist in participants' reported use of troubles talk scenes and ordinary conversation scenes for social support?

CHAPTER 3 – METHODS

Supernatural

This study utilized the American television show *Supernatural* as the context in which to explore the role of PSRs in the provision of social support. *Supernatural* originally aired on the WB in 2005 and wrapped up its fifteenth and final season on the CW in the fall of 2020.

International Movie Database (IMDb) describes the premise of the series as “two brothers follow their father’s footsteps as hunters, fighting evil supernatural beings of many kinds, including monsters, demons and gods that roam the earth” (Supernatural, n.d.). As such, the show consistently deals with themes of family and loss. *Supernatural*’s core viewership ranges from teenagers to young adults in their twenties for both men and women viewers (Metcalf, 2015).

According to data from the Nielsen Company, *Supernatural*’s viewership has fluctuated over its fifteen seasons run with a season one average of 4.52 million viewers per episode and a season fifteen average of 1.10 million viewers per episode (Ratings, n.d; Supernatural: Season Fifteen Ratings, 2020). However, despite *Supernatural*’s lackluster ratings in terms of viewership, it is an ideal context for this study because of its high levels of fan engagement. Ulaby (2014) writes:

[*Supernatural*’s] Nielsen ratings are, frankly, not that great. Yet *Supernatural* has lasted nine seasons (so far), partly because its fan base makes up in engagement what it lacks in size. *Supernatural* has as many ‘likes’ on Facebook as *NCIS*, a show with an audience six times larger.

Others have also attributed *Supernatural*’s long running success to its fan engagement and the methods by which it engages fans (Gonçalves, 2015). Gonçalves (2015) cites the series’ use of intertextuality, metafiction, and “breaking of the fourth wall” as ways the series directly engages fans and even transports the viewer. While I previously argued that the breaking of the fourth wall is a sign of parasocial interaction and that both parasocial interaction and

transportation are not the same or necessarily indicative of parasocial relationships, the presence of these two methods of engagement suggest high chances of PSRs as well, due to their similarities.

The timing of this study also happened to coincide with the series finale of *Supernatural* with three interviews taking place in the days prior and an additional eleven interviews in the two months following. I expected levels of fan engagement to be especially high during this period, again making *Supernatural* an ideal context for a study of PSRs.

Participants

For this study, individuals who identified as fans of the television series *Supernatural* were recruited using *Supernatural* focused fan sites such as Facebook groups, blogs, and forums, to participate in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. In order to participate, participants had to be 18 years or older and demonstrate a parasocial relationship with a character from *Supernatural*. To determine the existence of a PSR, potential participants completed a modified version of Rubin and colleague's (1985) Parasocial Interaction Scale. The scale was used to eliminate potential participants who, despite having an affinity for *Supernatural*, did not display a PSR with their chosen character. Participants were directed to complete the scale with their favorite character in mind. The mean statistical data and standard deviations from Rubin and colleague's (1985) original use of the scale were used as a comparison to determine eligibility in the study.

Of the 14 participants, 86% ($n = 12$) identified as women and 14% ($n = 2$) identified as men (see Table 1 on the next page for summary of demographics by participant). The majority of the participants identified as White (64%, $n = 9$), with an additional 14% of participants ($n = 2$) identifying as Asian, 7% ($n = 1$) as Hispanic/Latinx/of Spanish origin, 7% ($n = 1$) as Asian and

Table 1
Participant Demographic Summary

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Age	PSR Partner	Years Watching <i>Supernatural</i>
Sarah	Woman	White	34	Dean	11
Dalia	Woman	Asian	19	Sam	6
Alma	Woman	Hispanic/Latinx	43	Dean	13
Hannah	Woman	Asian & White	23	Castiel	9
Kelly	Woman	White	37	Dean	15
Adam	Man, Trans	White	22	Charlie	8
Joshua	Man	White	39	Sam	15
Amanda	Woman	White	30	Dean	8
Marissa	Woman	Black & White	19	Castiel	6
Grace	Woman	Asian	24	Castiel	5
Nicole	Woman	White	22	Charlie	3
Megan	Woman	White	26	Dean	15
Rebecca	Woman	White	27	Castiel	9
Catherine	Woman	White	27	Dean	7

White, and 7% ($n = 1$) as Black and White. Participants ranged in age from 19-43 years old ($M = 28$, $SD = 7.56$). The number of years participants reported viewing *Supernatural* ranged from 3-15 ($M = 9.29$, $SD = 3.95$).

Procedures

Recruitment materials posted online (see Appendix A) directed participants to complete an informed consent form in Qualtrics. After completing the informed consent, participants were directed to complete a modified version of Rubin and colleague's (1985) Parasocial Interaction Scale to determine the strength of their parasocial relationship, as well as to complete several demographic measures (see Appendix B). If determined eligible for the study, participants were contacted to schedule an online interview, held via Zoom.

The interview stage proceeded in three parts. In part one, participants were asked a series of questions about their favorite character from *Supernatural*, whom they referenced in the

preliminary Parasocial Interaction Scale. Participants were asked to broadly describe why the selected character was their favorite character, including what qualities of that character they like, and how they feel when the character displays those qualities. Participants were also asked if they view their favorite character as a supportive individual and what qualities influenced their determination. Lastly, participants were asked to describe in what situations they think of their favorite character and how it makes them feel to do so.

In the second part of the interview, participants watched either an ordinary conversation or troubles talk scene in which their PSR partner was engaged in conversation with another character (See Table 2 on the next page for summary of scenes). Scenes were preselected by the researcher to meet the qualifications of ordinary conversation or troubles talk. The order in which participants watched the two types of scenes was varied in order to control for any potential effects of scene order on participants impressions. For example, half of the participants who chose Dean as their PSR partner watched the ordinary conversation scene first, with the other half watching the troubles talk scene first. After watching the selected scene with the interviewer, participants answered a series of questions about how the conversation made them feel in general and specifically towards their PSR partner. Participants were also asked to characterize the supportive nature of the conversation and identify what aspects of the conversation were or were not supportive.

In the third and final part of the interview, participants watched either the ordinary conversation or troubles talk scene containing their character, whichever scene they did not watch in part two. The questions for this part of the interview were the same as in part two, however, participants were asked to reference the most recent scene when answering. For the exact interview protocol, please see Appendix C.

Table 2
Scene Summary

Character	Episode	Scene Type	Scene Summary
Dean	“Baby”	Ordinary	Dean discovers his brother Sam in the backseat of the car with a girl. Dean teases Sam and they sing along to the radio.
	“Hunteri Heroici”	Troubles	Castiel, Dean’s best friend, has recently come back into his life after being presumed dead. Dean tries to find out how Castiel is adjusting.
Sam	“A Very Supernatural Christmas”	Ordinary	Sam surprises his brother Dean with a Christmas celebration.
	“Angel Heart”	Troubles	Sam helps teenager Claire whose mother has gone missing.
Castiel	“The Things We Left Behind”	Ordinary	Castiel takes Claire out to lunch after breaking her out of her group home.
	“Despair”	Troubles	Castiel talks to his son Jack, who has been struggling to feel like he belongs in the world.
Charlie	“LARP and the Real Girl”	Ordinary	Charlie invites Dean to accompany her as she live-action role plays as a medieval queen.
	“Book of the Damned”	Troubles	Charlie talks to Sam about his fears of losing his brother, Dean.

Measures

While the Parasocial Interaction Scale (Rubin et al., 1985) is referred to as measuring parasocial interaction strength rather than parasocial relationship strength, Rubin and colleagues (1985) intended parasocial interaction to encompass more than just the viewing moment, describing parasocial interaction as “interaction, identification, and long-term identification with television characters” (p. 156). A *long-term* identification would indicate a parasocial relationship rather than a parasocial interaction. To test the validity of the scale in measuring parasocial relationship strength, Dibble, Hartmann, and Rosaen (2016) completed a comparative test of several parasocial relationship scales. The tests revealed the chosen scale is the best suited to measuring parasocial relationships, rather than parasocial interaction (Dibble et al., 2016).

Analysis

Interviews ranged in length from 36-74 minutes, with an average length of 57 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, resulting in 116 pages of single-spaced text. Interview transcripts were uploaded into QDA Miner Lite and coded in a multi-step process in

order to complete a thematic analysis of the data corpus. The order of analysis followed the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). After transcribing and becoming familiar with the data, the researcher conducted a preliminary coding of the data, generating codes as necessary. After the initial coding, existing codes were grouped into potential broader themes in response to the three research questions. Then, those newly created themes were reviewed in order to ensure the chosen codes fit within the assigned theme. After refining and naming the emergent themes, compelling examples were selected from the data to illustrate the themes.

CHAPTER 4 – RESULTS

Themes of Social Support

The first research question inquires how participants report relying on their parasocial relationship partner for social support (RQ1). From the interviews, four themes emerged corresponding with four distinct types of social support: *esteem support*, *informational support*, *emotional support*, and *social network support*.

Esteem Support

For viewers of *Supernatural*, thinking about and engaging with their PSR partners provided *esteem support*. In this study, I understand esteem support to be support which enhances one's feelings of self-worth and competence. This esteem support appeared in two main forms: as *motivation* and as *reminders of self-worth*. Many participants reported using their PSR partners' experiences handling difficult situations to motivate themselves to face their own personal hardships. One participant, Dalia, used her favorite character Sam in this way:

When [...] I'm tired and I'm messed up and I can't go on [...] I think about the fact that Sam has been through so much, and he still gets up every day and still fights for the world. So, if he can do it, I can do it. It really helps me to get up every day.

This was echoed by Catherine, who said of her PSR partner Dean: "I like to think about Dean and like what he's gone through and how he's handled it [...] if Dean can get through that, then I suppose I can handle this."

Many participants, like Dalia and Catherine, used their PSR partner as a point of comparison, noting that the characters' difficult lives are often worse than their own. This comparison motivated them to face their own troubles head-on. In other instances, participants

were motivated to make their PSR partner proud through their actions and persistence. As one participant, Nicole, explained:

I kinda ask myself “What would Charlie do?” [...] I guess kind of like give myself a pep talk kind of in a way. But I guess I’m very character driven with motivation, because like, “You’re gonna go to work, you’re gonna do great, and you’re gonna make so-and-so proud.”

For Nicole, imagining Charlie as invested in her own successes provided her with an extrinsic motivation when her intrinsic motivation was lacking.

The second way participants found esteem support in their PSRs was through *reminders of self-worth*. Reminders of self-worth consisted of reminders of personal value as well as reminders that participants have agency in their lives, particularly around the decisions they make. Megan discussed the value she was able to see in herself through her PSR partner, Dean:

I see myself reflected back when I look at this character in a lot of ways, so to have them have like these really vulnerable moments, these really like emotional connections between other characters, feels like I get to be in that scene kind of in a way, and it [...] feels good to have someone else value that character because then you get to like instill value on yourself.

Joshua described a similar experience of rediscovering his own self-worth, brought on by his PSR partner, Sam:

Despite having seen this episode multiple times ... I ‘heard’ that speech in an entirely different way. Sam was angry ... mad at everything ... mad at everyone ... mad all the time. He was acknowledging that anger ... and for the first time, it made me recognize and acknowledge the anger inside of myself that I’d been struggling to hide and ignore.

Joshua goes on to explain how viewing this scene, in which Sam has an emotional reckoning of his own, triggered a series of events which made Joshua realize he needed to change and put himself first.

I made the choice that day that I was done being ‘this’ person. I was no longer going to be held back by feelings of obligation, my depression or my anxiety [...] I had to build a life for myself.

While some, like Megan and Joshua, were reminded by their PSR partners' own vulnerable moments of their own value, others were reminded by their PSR partner's experiences of the agency they have in their own lives, especially in regards to decision-making. Marissa speaks of her favorite character, Castiel (Cass), offering her that reminder:

I just think there's a lot of moments for him that I like, that are just reminding you, you can choose to be good and you can choose to care about like the things that you have brought into your life. Like, you aren't dictated by outside sources.

Marissa explains how Castiel's character arc is a journey of discovering free will. Through watching him discover he has choices in life, Marissa was reminded of her own agency and competency in making choices.

Just as it can take different forms in face-to-face relationships, esteem support appears in PSR in varying ways, including as motivation and as reminders of self-worth. What is clear is that PSR partners, even fictional characters, can provide esteem support.

Informational Support

The characters of *Supernatural*, though fictional and unable to directly interact with viewers, still provided those viewers with valuable *informational support*. In this context, I understand informational support to be information which helps the recipient make decisions or feel more competent in making decisions. The competency component can make some aspects of informational support cross into esteem support; however, informational support is distinct from esteem support in that informational support involves the provision of information. Some of the informational support apparent in this study came in the form of *specific advice* and other as more general *life lessons*. Interestingly, two participants reported drawing on their PSR partner for specific advice on how to provide social support for others. Take Dalia's description of relying on her favorite character Sam: "When I need to have empathy or something and you

know this is a difficult situation. ‘What should I do?’ Then, I think of him.” Dalia uses Sam as a model of empathy and emulates his behavior in situations where she wants to display empathy.

However, others imagined specific advice from their PSR partner when they found themselves dealing with difficult and personal situations. Joshua described the step-by-step advice he felt Sam would offer him:

I did ask myself, “What would Sam do?” Aside from trying to make me see the person that he saw and try to help me see only the good in myself – I thought that he would: 1) Acknowledge the problem – I’m the one responsible for my own misery. 2) Determine the cause – I’d grown accustomed to blaming cancer or others for my misery and anger because it was easier. 3) Find the solution – no longer choosing that misery and choosing to change the things about myself that I don’t like. 4) Make the changes – keep losing weight, de-choard and get my house together, work on my image and self-esteem, stop locking myself away in my house, start putting myself in new or uncomfortable situations to confront my depression and anxiety, allow myself to be happy. And that’s exactly what I’ve started doing.

This particular piece of advice provides information in the form of directions to take to solve Joshua’s problem of low self-esteem. Represented here is the connection between informational support and esteem support noted above. Joshua used this imagined advice as both motivation to solve his problem and as a way to renew a sense of agency in his life choices and improve his sense of self-worth.

Like Joshua’s imagined advice from his PSR partner, other participants used their imagination (and the imagination of like-minded fans) to create fanfiction and metafiction, placing their PSR partner into a situation from which the participants themselves could learn. For example, Megan reported taking advice from her PSR partner, Dean, through engaging with other fans’ metafiction:

When I read other people’s meta about Dean having ADHD or Dean dealing with an anxiety disorder, that’s really cathartic to me, because I’m so close to the character and I care about that so much. Like, reading about a character that has dealt with that and then kind of applying it to my own life is helpful.

While theoretically Megan could receive the same advice on living with ADHD or an anxiety disorder from the fellow fan who wrote the metafiction, what is telling from her response is that the connection she feels with Dean is important to her taking the advice. Megan does not have a direct connection to the writer of the metafiction like she does with Dean. In this way, PSR partners can be a source of advice for viewers.

However, not every participant took informational support from their PSR partner in the form of specific advice. Others reported learning more generalized life lessons. While advice is meant to help solve a particular issue during a moment of time, life lessons are information that can be recalled over and over again or at a later time when it becomes relevant. When asked if she had learned anything from her favorite character, Charlie, Nicole responded:

This may be cliché but get out of your comfort zone. Do things that people would think aren't, like, predictable of you [...] show them who you are, what you can do [...] Be more confident in yourself [...] I'm gaining a lot of confidence through the show and through her.

Important to note here is again the connection between informational and esteem support. Nicole gaining confidence through Charlie's life lessons can double as Charlie providing Nicole esteem support in the form of a confidence boost. But informational support still deserves a separate place, as not all information serves an esteem boosting function. For example, Rebecca also learns generalizable life lessons from her PSR partner, Cass, but for Rebecca this does not serve an esteem support function.

I don't necessarily think of Cass' actions as advice, but I do think of them almost like a fable in some way [...] it might give me ideas for how not to handle it or just ask the question, "How are you going to handle it?"

Unique in Rebecca's response is that informational support does not have to provide positive instruction (do this) but can also give negative instruction (do not do this).

Even though fictional characters and other PSR partners do not know what problem the support seeker is facing, the support seeker can still receive informational support from their partner with just a bit of creative thinking.

Emotional Support

The third type of support participants reported finding in their PSRs is *emotional support*, understood here as support which makes the receiver feel better about their situation/hardship. The primary way emotional support appeared in participants' descriptions of their relationship with their PSR partner was through *comfort*. Participants reported seeking out interactions with their PSR partners when they needed comfort, such as Hannah with her PSR partner, Castiel:

When I do have some type of hardship, like when I'm going through a rough time, I do find myself relying more on this comfort media and my emotional support characters, which I refer to Castiel as. So I use it in those hard times as a source of comfort.

Interestingly, Hannah went so far as to refer to Castiel as her "emotional support character," mirroring the language of emotional support animals and suggesting that, like these animals, fictional characters can provide an important source emotional support. In addition to just seeking out a PSR partner for comfort, some participants, like Joshua with informational support, imagined entire interactions with their comfort character. For example, Kelly described thinking of both Sam and Dean, imagining they are real people in her life:

When I'm feeling a little lonely [...] I'm like, "Oh, they've been gone on a hunt, and I know they're coming home." So I'm like making them dinner and stuff like that, and I'm like, "Oh it feels good." You know, I get a little warm and fuzzy like I would if I was actually home with my real family, and I like that. It's comforting for me.

However, not all participants used their imagination to garner emotional support from their PSR partner. While Hannah, as stated above, feels emotionally supported by Castiel, her experiences are different than that of Kelly. Hannah stated:

“I mean obviously with like real life relationships, it’s two way whereas this is one way, so it’s gonna be different in that regard, where, you know, if I need [Castiel] for emotional support or whatever, I can only rely on the text, what has been actually provided toward me.”

While some participants, like Hannah and Kelly, reported seeking out their PSR partner for comfort around specific moments and experiences such as specific hardship and loneliness, others described being comforted every time they thought of their PSR partner. Dalia described her feelings when thinking of her PSR partner, Sam:

The word good is very general, and it’s not very specific. But, every time I think about Sam, it’s like, you know, I just feel comforted [by] the fact that if he was real, he would be there for me.

Lastly, while some participants experienced their PSR partner as a primary source of comfort, others drew comfort from the familiarity of the character. For some participants, they had known and interacted with their PSR partner for fifteen years, making this character a significant, familiar, and long-term relationship in their life. As Adam explained of his PSR partner, Charlie: “Watching her and thinking about it and everything, it does feel good. It [...] has that sense of familiarity and comfort [...] She is a comfort.” Marissa made a similar observation about her relationship with Castiel, highlighting his fictional nature as adding to the comfort and familiarity.

It’s like a one-way connection, so I don’t have to worry about, like, what I’m doing or, like you know, if they are going to do something unexpected [...] It’s not like when you have a real friendship and there’s always like this sort of [...] anxiety about, “What if I do something wrong and they’re mad at me?” Or “What if they don’t actually like me, and I’m annoying them?” or whatever. But that doesn’t exist when you’re watching a show [...] I know that I like Cass and Cass isn’t real, so Cass doesn’t like me, but it doesn’t really matter, because I’m just comforted by like the familiarity of watching it.

Counter to Marissa’s assertion that the fictional nature of the character is comforting, Joshua felt that his PSR partner being fictional was a limitation to support. When asked if Sam, his PSR

partner, provides emotional support, Joshua stated, “My first instinct is to say no because I know that he’s not a real [person].” While Joshua’s statement highlights that not all PSR relationships can and will provide emotional support, comfort was still one of the primary ways through which participants reported their PSR partner supporting them.

Social Network Support

The last type of social support provided by PSR partners is *social network support*. In the context of this study, I define social network support as support which strengthens feelings of connections to others. Social network support was heavily characterized by participants’ reports of *creating and maintaining connections* and *feelings of belonging*.

Many participants discussed the role of *Supernatural* as a series in creating and maintaining connections with other fans. While many of these examples do not specifically point to PSRs as the connecting force, PSRs are still influential in the personal connection the participants have with the series. Without that personal connection, the participants would not reach the next step of connecting with others.

Some of these connections fostered by *Supernatural* are *new* connections, as Alma and Catherine both described. Alma stated, “I remember I had taken my daughter to the library [...] I was sitting next to another mom, and I saw she had a phone case, and it was *Supernatural* [...] we hit it off right then and there.” The idea of making new friends through *Supernatural* is echoed by Catherine, who discussed joining a *Supernatural* pen pal group: “[*Supernatural*] does help me make friendships a lot more too [...] I’ve made a lot of friendships through the show.” In addition to forming new connections, participants also highlighted how *Supernatural* helped them to maintain *old* connections. Grace stated:

What fascinates me about *Supernatural*, I guess as a series and as a fandom collectively, is that it's the only one thus far I've seen where we can all sort of like

unite [...] also, like, it's very cool how I kept in contact with my friends from high school, like that friend group specifically and that one best *Supernatural* friend. But the finale, but *Supernatural* ending, was actually the real catalyst where we now talk like every day.

These connections fostered by *Supernatural*, whether they are new or old connections, broaden one's social network and increase the availability of social network support.

However, in addition to creating and maintaining connections, participants directly reported feeling a sense of belonging from their PSR partners. Kelly put it quite succinctly, stating about brothers Sam and Dean, "I feel like I'm part of their family." The connotation of family – connection, love, and belonging – and the warmth present in Kelly's tone of voice support her receiving social network support from Sam and Dean. One participant, Rebecca, uniquely connected the fan community, within which people form relationships and find social network support, to her PSR partner Castiel and the feelings of belonging caused by both the community and Castiel:

When I watch fanvids, when I watch clips of *Supernatural*, when I'm on TikTok and I see people cosplaying this character, there's just a sense of like "This is nice." It's like going to your friend's house a little bit, and when I was younger, I think it was more like I was just desperate for a connection with something, and I think that I found like a community of people that really cared about this character through this character, and then this character kind of became an embodiment of the community that I was a part of. And now, it's like the character in my head is connected to this community and is connected to this feeling of like belonging and understanding, and I don't know. It's nice to see that he's still around.

Although fictional, participants still considered characters members of their social networks, whether they classified those characters as family or friends. As network members, the PSR partners are capable of providing social network support as well as being a conduit to other new, network connections, such as Rebecca described above.

Through these four themes of social support, *esteem support*, *informational support*, *emotional support*, and *social network support*, it is evident that PSR partners, even fictional

ones, are still valuable sources of social support for many people and should not be discounted due to the impossibility of reciprocity.

Themes of Supportive Messages

The second research question investigated which message qualities participants viewed as supportive in their PSR partners' interactions with other characters (RQ2). While many individual message characteristics were reported to be supportive, these characteristics are best represented by three main themes: *nonverbal immediacy*, *verbal person centeredness*, and *environmental appropriateness*. A fourth theme highlights the normative nature of social support, indicating how what is supportive for one person might not be supportive to another. This idea is captured by the theme *support opposites*.

Nonverbal Immediacy

The visual nature of television allowed participants to identify nonverbal indicators of support in conjunction with verbal messages of support. These nonverbal signals illustrated *nonverbal immediacy*, or behaviors “which reflect empathy, interpersonal warmth, and psychological closeness” (Jones & Guerrero, 2001, p. 568). Participants often identified more than one nonverbal indicator of warmth and caring in a supportive message, such as in the case of Alma when describing how her PSR partner, Dean, interacted with his best friend, Castiel:

I think [Dean] handled it beautifully. I think that he does come across as very supportive [...] he started off at the computer and was just trying to make it more of like a small talk casual conversation [...] even though Cass still was resistant by it, I like that you know Dean didn't shy away and [...] still pursued it, and now this time more directly by closing his computer and going and sitting on the bed right in front of him and like talking to him face-to-face [...] I thought that was really like demonstrated his emotional intelligence like, “You know what? This approach is not working. Let me do a more direct approach and just sit in front of him and address it head on.” So, in that situation, I was looking at his facial features. He really did seem genuinely concerned and supportive and was wanting to hear more about what is really going on in Cass' mind.

In the above scene, Alma identified several aspects of nonverbal immediacy present in the clip and demonstrated effective social support. First, she noted that Dean moved closer to Cass, crossing the room to sit beside him. She also identified Dean's facial features showed genuine concern.

While watching the same scene, another participant, Catherine, honed in on different nonverbal cues: "I really appreciate that [Dean] makes eye contact with Cass so he knows that Cass is being heard and listened to [...] I've noticed he kinda leans more towards him, so [Cass] knows that he's not alone." Catherine adds eye contact and body orientation to the closeness and facial features described by Alma. All of these nonverbal cues (eye contact, body orientation, closeness, and expressions of concern) exemplify nonverbal immediacy, as they contribute to a sense of closeness and warmth between the characters.

However, participants noted nonverbal immediacy in more than just this scene and from different support providers than Dean. Grace, whose PSR partner is Castiel, described the nonverbals she found supportive in his interaction with another character, Jack: "When [Castiel] lays a hand on Jack's shoulder and then sort of directly addresses him, I think that's probably the most telling part of the body language."

As evidenced by participants' dissections of scenes from *Supernatural*, nonverbal cues heavily influence the supportive evaluation of a conversation. The nonverbal behavior participants reported as supportive largely fits within the definition of nonverbal immediacy, which is a known aspect of supportive messages (Jones & Guerrero, 2001).

Verbal Person Centeredness

In addition to nonverbal immediacy, participants also described key characteristics of verbal messages between characters that they found supportive. These messages mirror

important elements of messages high in *verbal person centeredness*. Messages high in verbal person centeredness “explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, legitimize, and contextualize the distressed other’s feelings and perspective” (Burlison, 2008, p. 208). For example, one participant (Dalia) described a message by what it was *not*, highlighting that the message was not characteristic of supportive messages low in verbal person centeredness. As Dalia explained of her PSR partner, Sam, when supporting a teenager named Claire: “He doesn’t just go there and deny the fact that whatever she’s feeling is wrong or whatever she’s feeling is a teenage feeling or something. He tries to relate with her.” According to Dalia’s evaluation, had Sam devalued Claire’s feelings, Claire would not have felt supported by Sam.

Other participants talked about verbal messages in terms of what was said. One characteristic of messages high in verbal person centeredness is giving the support recipient an opportunity to elaborate and explore their feelings (Burlison, 2008). Rebecca described her PSR partner, Castiel, giving Jack that opportunity:

There’s two things that I think are really cool that Cass did in that scene [...] the second thing is the just asking about how Jack is doing. Like that is also another, I think, rarity on *Supernatural*: where a character honestly, and truly, wants to know how another character is doing and asks about it.

Participants noted this particular type of verbal person centeredness, opportunity for elaboration, in an additional scene between Dean and Castiel, as well. Kelly explained:

Cass, still even after coming back from Purgatory, like, he’s learning more about the people and stuff. He still has a hard time understanding [humans], and so I think Dean knew that in that moment, and so he was like I know you probably don’t really understand or know how to express what you’re feeling, but I want you to know that I’m here and you can talk to me about it.

In both these descriptions, the participants described their PSR partners (Cass and Dean respectively) giving their conversational partner (Jack and Cass respectively) a chance to explore and elaborate upon their emotions. In the first description, Cass created an opportunity for Jack

to explore his emotions by asking Jack how he is doing. Had Cass not asked, it is possible Jack would not have had the chance to dig into his feelings and thus would be unable to come to terms with his emotions. Similarly, in the second description, Dean realized Cass was struggling with understanding his own emotions and helped Cass come to understand those feelings through conversation. Had Dean not helped Cass articulate his emotions, Cass might have continued to struggle, and Dean's support would have been ineffective.

Thus, in addition to nonverbal aspects of messages, participants found messages higher in verbal person centeredness to be supportive, citing both validation and opportunity for elaboration as positive characteristics.

Environmental Appropriateness

The third characteristic of supportive messages participants identified was the setting of the message. This *environmental appropriateness* included the relational history between the support provider and recipient, the timing of the message, and who else was present or not present for the interaction. Dalia discussed her PSR partner, Sam's, effort to establish a stronger relationship with Claire first before attempting to provide her with advice: "He tries to talk [to] her [and] make [...] a playground and then start playing on it instead of you know just playing – having the conversation." Dalia's playground metaphor establishes her belief in the importance of environmental appropriateness when giving support. As Claire did not know Sam well at this point in time, him providing support to her without first attempting to establish common ground (i.e., a playground) could have been less effective or even made Claire feel uncomfortable, undermining his supportive intentions.

In regards to message timing, Kelly described how patience can affect the environmental appropriateness of a message. She stated, "[Dean] was on his computer, and he comes over,

focuses on Cass, and he's like really waiting for him [...] and gives him the space to [talk], and then Cass feels like he can open up." In this quote, Kelly demonstrated her belief that waiting until someone else is ready to talk can be more effective than trying to force the person's feelings out when they are not ready.

Another participant, Hannah, provided more detail in regards to what makes an appropriate support environment through an example of her PSR partner Castiel: "He created this environment where you know they could be vulnerable with each other [...] he waited for an opportunity where Sam and Dean were away so that [...] Jack could feel more comfortable." Prior to the scene Hannah described, Jack overheard Dean, who had been a father/uncle figure to him, say that Jack was not family. Hannah articulated her belief that had Dean been present while Castiel talked to Jack, Jack would have been uncomfortable and Castiel's support would have fallen flat, overshadowed by Dean's presence. Thus, by waiting for Dean to leave, Castiel fostered a more appropriate environment.

According to participants' articulations of the above scenes, the setting or environment of the social support message is an important consideration of whether or not the message is deemed to be supportive or at least effective in its offering of support.

Support Opposites

An important theme emerged demonstrating how different participants had varied understandings and preferences when it came to the supportive messages and behaviors of their PSR partners. These *support opposites* evidence the normative understanding of social support, which maintains that support is a highly contextualized experience among interactants (Goldsmith, 2004). Several support opposites appeared in the data: *enforcing normal vs. persistence, relating vs. alternative perspectives, and touch vs. distance.*

Enforcing normal encapsulated some participants' sentiment that, sometimes, the best way to be supportive was to pretend that a problem did not exist or to avoid discussion of the problem itself. Joshua discussed Sam supporting his brother Dean in this way: "Not bringing up the darkness they're about to face [...] it's burying your head in the sand, but at the same time, sometimes you gotta do that so you can enjoy some kind of positive things." The opposite of enforcing normal is *persistence* in discussing the problem at hand. Rather than "burying your head in the sand" as Joshua states, persistence is about digging up the truth. Catherine illustrated this interpretation of support when discussing her PSR partner, Dean:

I like how he doesn't brush off that Cass obviously has an issue with talking about Heaven. He's like "No, something is wrong. I have to figure out what's wrong so I can give him advice, and so I can help him rather than just ignoring it until it gets worse."

This opposite articulation of enforcing normal and persistence appears to involve a judgment call on the feasibility of solving a problem. In the example Joshua cites of Sam ignoring Dean's problem, Sam could not fix the problem. Dean was dying and Sam could not have prevented it by providing social support. However, in Catherine's example of Dean being persistent in getting Cass to open up, Dean could help Cass with his problem, which was fear of returning home to Heaven after a war.

A second set of support opposites centered on how a support provider could insert themselves into the discussion. Some participants reported that a provider *relating* to the recipient was supportive, such as Grace's description of Castiel supporting Claire:

I feel he's sort of able to talk about these things, because of that experience. And then it seems like that advice and sort of that comfort he's telling is sort of coming from an honest place of like he knows how that feels.

Opposite of relating to a support recipient was providing an *alternative perspective* for the recipient to consider. Adam described that he finds his PSR partner, Charlie, to be supportive in

her willingness to provide an alternative perspective to Sam and Dean: “Yeah like even if she questions their methods, her goal is to help them [...] very supportive in the long run.” As with enforcing normal and persistence, it is possible this choice between relating and providing an alternative perspective involves a situational determination on the part of the provider. If the recipient’s current perspective on a situation is harmful (as is often the case with Sam and Dean) then it would be inappropriate and unsupportive for Charlie to relate.

The last pairing of opposites is *touch vs. distance*. This pairing highlights the complex nature of social support and speaks to both the importance of nonverbal immediacy and environmental appropriateness in effective communication. Sometimes, a typically supportive action would not be considered supportive by the recipient due to the environment or nature of the relationship. This can be seen in participants’ evaluations of both touch and distance as supportive in different circumstances. For example, Hannah described touch as supportive in an interaction between her PSR partner, Castiel, and his adopted son Jack: “He gave him the shoulder touch so physical comfort [...] I mean that was his love for Jack coming through, and that was him taking the more parental role with him.” In a parent-child dynamic, Hannah deemed a touch on the shoulder appropriate as a form of giving support. However, Dalia described a situation where her PSR partner, Sam, kept his distance while offering support, and noted its effectiveness in the moment:

I like the fact that he was sitting [...] like yeah, “I’m there, but you have the choice that you move around the room and you listen to me. I’m not going to get up and be all aggressive” [...] yeah, he would come across as intimidating if he was standing.

In this interaction, it would have been inappropriate for Sam, an adult man, to use touch or close physical proximity as a way to support a teenage girl, Claire, who he does not know very well nor have a familial or comfortable relationship with at this point in time. As Dalia pointed out, it

would have been intimidating for Sam to stand or attempt to move into Claire's space given their relationship dynamics.

Clearly, social support is a complex process that varies depending on the situation, including the people involved and their preferences and relational history. This indicates that social support is normative.

Themes of Troubles Talk and Ordinary Conversation

The last research question sought to identify differences between participants' use of their PSR partner for social support in ordinary conversation scenes and troubles talk scenes (RQ3). Rather than emphasizing the distinct qualities between ordinary conversations and troubles talk, some participants highlighted a similarity between the two scene types: *relating to others*. Other participants, however, described distinct functions/affordances of troubles talk scenes versus ordinary conversation scenes. This distinction is captured in the theme of *catharsis vs. escapism*. Lastly, ordinary conversation scenes served a unique and separate purpose of *affect enhancement*.

Relating to Others

Participants reported that both troubles talk and ordinary conversation scenes afforded participants an opportunity for connecting and *relating to others*. This finding mirrors that of the social network support finding for RQ1; however, relating to others does not necessarily progress to the stage of relationship formation as does the forming of social ties described in social network support. It appears that PSR partners serve to connect participants with a larger community, even if that connection is ephemeral. One participant, Megan, described how she often reviews troubles talk scenes on Tumblr. She explained why she engages in that practice:

Not a lot of my [in real life] friends are fans, so pretty much every interaction I have with *Supernatural* is strictly online [...] part of like going out and seeking

out like the sad content is to know I'm not the only one who noticed this thing, noticed this character trait of Dean's that's like really heartbreakingly emotional. Like, "Oh, how many other people noticed that too?" And, "You write this meta about it, so I'll go read that." And it makes me sad, but at the same time, it's so nice to feel like I'm not alone in this, that other people are suffering at the same time as me.

According to Megan, her feelings for her PSR partner, Dean, are so strong that when she sees him engage in troubles talk, which she identified primarily as sad content, she wanted to connect with other people who feel the same way. While troubles talk scenes made Megan want to reach out and form connections with others, Sarah described using ordinary conversation scenes as a way to relate with others: "Sometimes, a situation happens in your real life and you just kinda need a quote from a TV show—something to connect it back, and if you're with somebody who would recognize the quote, it works. It's a shorthand." In her interview, Sarah described how many of the ordinary conversation scenes were funny or quotable, so she relied on those quotable moments to relate to others outside of the show itself.

It appears that for participants, the type of content, troubles talk or ordinary conversation, does not impede them from using it to relate to other people. However, a subtle difference existed between the use of the two types of scenes for relating to others. Troubles talk scenes appeared to help viewers relate to each other on an emotional level, while ordinary conversation scenes operated more as a humor device such as an inside joke. Regardless of the small differences, they both served the larger function of connecting people.

Catharsis vs. Escapism

Several participants described the difference between troubles talk scenes and ordinary conversation scenes as a difference in *catharsis vs. escapism*. They identified that watching troubles talk scenes involving their PSR partner were a form of *catharsis*, or a way to engage with their own emotions, while ordinary conversation scenes allowed them to ignore their

emotions through *escapism*. For example, Rebecca referred to her PSR partner, Castiel, in these scenes as an emotional buffer, stating:

I can return to certain scenes or certain storylines and engage with that emotion in a way that isn't like fully overwhelming, because I have Cass as kind of the buffer. Like, he's feeling it, and I get to feel it because he's feeling it, but it doesn't overwhelm me.

In contrast, Rebecca described how those ordinary conversation scenes, or even ordinary scenes without conversation, with Castiel served as an escape:

I think sometimes its escapism. Like, I just want to see somebody else feel different things, and that can be either because I'm feeling bad or feeling good. And sometimes, it's just nice to watch characters that you like do stuff. Like, you know, in "Atomic Monsters" when Becky's like, "I just want to see them do laundry." There's a certain amount of, once you're attached to a character, you just want to see them do whatever. And I think that Cass definitely serves that role for me where I'm like, "I'm already attached to him, I would watch him do whatever."

Marissa echoed Rebecca's thoughts on both types of scenes. She reported using a troubles talk scene to feel and engage with her own emotions:

Scenes that are more emotional or a little bit heavier can be nice when you are also sort of feeling a little bit overwhelmed, because it's nice to see yourself reflected in a sense, even though the problems are definitely still totally different. But that doesn't mean the emotional core of the situation can't be something similar or something that can like speak to whatever you are personally going through. But also, like, sometimes you just want to watch like emotional scenes, not because you are feeling the kind of whatever emotion is happening. They just have like an impact on you by virtue of being emotional.

Marissa continued, explaining her connection to *Supernatural's* scenes of ordinary conversation:

I think that [...] this [...] kind of normal scenes can offer like a nice distraction from when real life is like heavy. Watching scenes where characters—or scenes or episodes where things are lighter or a little bit more normal—can be a nice distraction.

For some participants like Rebecca and Marissa, a clear distinction existed between what they sought from troubles talk scenes as compared to ordinary conversations scenes. However, both participants also reported that this was not true one hundred percent of the time. Sometimes,

diving into a character's emotions could function as an escape, and other times, it was cathartic to take part in the lightheartedness of a character's ordinary conversation.

Affect Enhancement

The last affordance participants reported, *affect enhancement*, was unique to ordinary conversation scenes. Watching a PSR partner engage in an ordinary conversation served to make viewers smile, laugh, or feel good. Hannah outlined several examples beyond the scene viewed during her interview in which her PSR partner, Castiel, engaged in ordinary conversation. Her joy in these scenes was evident in her voice as she described how these moments made her feel:

OMG yeah, I also just thought of like "Tombstone", where they're cowboys and he's wearing that stupid hat and he says, "I'm your huckleberry." And like that was just so endearing to me, because like it's revealed then that they have movie nights and Dean makes [Cass] watch the movies. And it's more in-tune to like the relationships between the characters when there's not drama going on. And also, in like the "ScoobyNatural" episode [...] where Dean at the end goes, "Scooby dooby doo!" and then it circles in on his face, and Cass says, "Dean, you're not a talking dog." And it's just [Cass] being, like, really done with [Dean]. I just love those moments, and I think they're just, those are the moments I really like, because it's just showing [Cass] as just a normal person and his relationships with the people around him. And you're right, they are very small. And you know, we very rarely get to see them, which is a crime. I just want a TV show about [Cass] just living his day-to-day life [...] it seems like a lot of [fans] just want to see those small great moments and those like golden moments for all the characters that aren't necessarily like related to the plot [...] I just, well, I look at those and I'm like "Wow, I love him." [...] And I'm like overcome with this like emotion of like I just love them. I think they're the greatest [...] I do sometimes seek out like the funny moments for a serotonin boost, but a lot of the times, it's just like looking at a friend and like seeing them be goofy or dumb or whatever.

Hannah described that sometimes she seeks out these specific scenes for a "serotonin boost" and sometimes just a reminder of the scenes, such as she experienced during the interview, made her feel good.

Seeking out scenes to rewatch for the express purpose of feeling better was less common than simply remembering a scene randomly or because something in a participant's own life

served as a reminder. For example, Joshua did not report seeking out specific content, but he did describe how simply remembering scenes from *Supernatural* still positively impacted him:

It definitely improves my mood when I think about it, because it will give me a chuckle. It will make me smile, and that changes me for that moment if not for the next couple of hours, depending how my day is going.

An important consideration when drawing conclusions about the ability of ordinary conversation scenes to enhance participants' affect is that, in the television show *Supernatural*, ordinary conversations are rare. As Hannah pointed out, these scenes are infrequent and usually short. It is possible that the infrequency of these scenes makes them more positive in participants' minds, because they are used to their PSR partners suffering. However, regardless of the cause, participants explained that remembering and watching a favorite character in an ordinary conversation scene could positively impact their mood.

CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION

The present study had three goals/research questions. First, how do viewers of *Supernatural* report using their PSR partner for social support? Second, when viewing their PSR partner interact with other characters, what criteria do participants report using to evaluate a message as supportive or unsupportive? Finally, is there a difference in what participants report receiving in terms of benefits from watching their PSR partner engage in ordinary conversation (Lakey & Orehek, 2011) and troubles talk (Goldsmith, 2004)?

PSR Partners as Support Providers

The primary goal of this study was to extend scholarly understanding of who/what can provide social support by examining the role of PSR partners (specifically, fictional characters of the American television show *Supernatural*). This motion to include PSR partners as sources of social support issued a direct challenge to fundamental understandings of social support. First, social support is widely considered to be a reciprocal process, meaning the roles of provider and recipient can, theoretically, be reversed at any time (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987). Parasocial relationships are, by definition, one-sided, with the lack of reciprocity being the feature which distinguishes PSRs from other types of relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956). According to the reciprocal understanding of social support then, the support the participants of the study reported receiving from their PSR partners is *not* social support.

Second, social support is understood as being an intentional process. Goldsmith and Fitch (1997) state that support is rhetorical, or that “situations in which social support is communicated involve multiple goals and outcomes and that effective interactants are those who deploy discursive resources in ways that are adapted to these demands” (p. 455). However, PSR partners

are not aware of the support seeker's existence, let alone their goals. The messages PSR partners give viewers are not designed to meet the viewers' specific needs, and any goals the PSR partner may have are entirely unrelated to the person engaging with the PSR partner. Thus, it is clear PSR partners as support providers do not fit under traditional conceptions of social support. But that does not mean PSR partners should be discounted as providers. Instead, definitions of social support must stretch to accommodate fictional friends.

However, the above mentioned characteristics of social support emerge from the communication paradigm. As I have argued, much can be gained through the merging of cross-disciplinary understandings of social support. While the normative approach's principles appear to discount the possibility of PSR partners as social support providers, psychology's relational regulation theory welcomes it. RRT does not require reciprocity, nor does it require intentional message design (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). However, the reason for this is that the psychological paradigm, and RRT specifically, engages with perceived, rather than enacted, support. This suggests viewers of *Supernatural* do not receive actual support, but they can perceive the character would offer it, if possible. The results of the present study indicate the presence of both perceived and enacted support – providing further evidence that social support is more elastic than currently assumed.

Enacted and Perceived Support

As stated, the results of this study included both perceived and enacted support. Several participants described what they believed their PSR partner would say to them if the PSR partner could communicate directly to the participant. I have classified these instances as perceived support, as they demonstrate a belief about what a character *would* do instead of describing what the character *has* done. One compelling instance of perceived support is the step-by-step advice

Joshua perceived his PSR partner, Sam, would offer him. Joshua described that Sam would “help me see only the good in myself.” Additionally, Dalia stated of Sam: “if he was real, he would be there for me.” These participants demonstrated a perception that their PSR partner is supportive without receiving support.

Other support participants reported receiving from their PSR partners was enacted support. I separate enacted support from perceived support in this context by classifying enacted support as actions characters actually performed within the boundaries of the show. Two examples of enacted support, by this definition, present within the results are the lessons, such as being confident and getting out of personal comfort zones, that Nicole reported learning from watching her PSR partner, Charlie, on screen and the comfort several participants reported feeling when watching their PSR partner, including Adam, who also said of Charlie, “She is a comfort.” As these instances of support stem directly from the show, they are examples of enacted support. The presence of both perceived and enacted support in PSRs is further evidence that PSRs are similar to face-to-face relationships, especially in regards to providing support, as perceived support and enacted support are both commonly studied in face-to-face relationships. While both enacted and perceived support were present in the results of this study, so were four of the five types of support.

Esteem Support

Findings from this research and participants’ PSR experiences included four of the five types of social support identified in the non-PSR literature: *esteem support*, *emotional support*, *informational support*, and *social network support*. In regards to esteem support, participants’ reports fit into two general forms of esteem support: motivation and reminders of self-worth. These two concepts parallel Holmstrom’s (2015) definition of esteem support as, “social support

that is intended to enhance how another person feels about him or herself and his or her attributes, abilities, and accomplishments” (p. 282). The results of this study indicate that PSR partners provide motivation by being a point of comparison for participants. Dalia and Catherine both articulated that realizing their PSR partners have successfully dealt with worse problems than their own motivated them to keep tackling their own problems.

Much of the data classified under reminders of self-worth also involved a social comparison. Participants reported relating to their PSR partner and to their struggles, which helped them realize that if the character on the screen still had worth and value, then so did they as real people. Megan described this experience as “instilling value on yourself.” This social comparison might be linked to the concept of identification. Identification is the process of imagining oneself to be similar to a character (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2016). Megan identified with her PSR partner Dean as she felt they had similar qualities and even described looking at Dean as a reflection of herself. While in this case Megan identified with her PSR partner, identification and PSRs can also occur independently. For example, Joshua engaged in a social comparison with his PSR partner without indicating he identified with his PSR partner Sam. This social comparison occurred as a result of watching a specific scene, in which his PSR partner, Sam, acknowledged his anger at life. Through watching this scene, Joshua acknowledged his own anger and made a commitment to himself to rebuild his own feelings of self-worth. Previous research has indicated that PSRs have esteem benefits. Derrick and colleagues (2008) found that exposure to a PSR partner led individuals to feel closer to their own ideal selves. The present study extends PSR research on esteem benefits by connecting it directly to esteem support and furthering the argument that PSRs are similar to face-to-face relationships.

Informational Support

As with esteem support, participants reported experiencing informational support in two general forms: as specific advice and as life lessons. Cutrona and Suhr (1994) defined informational support as advice, factual input, and feedback. Both specific advice and life lessons fit best under Cutrona and Suhr's (1994) conceptualization of advice. Specific advice and life lessons are separated into distinct categories in this study, because participants used specific advice from their PSR partners to address specific problems whereas life lessons were broadly applicable beyond a single situation. Participants reported receiving specific advice in regards problems including dealing with ADHD and anxiety, anger issues, and supporting others. For example, Dalia described thinking of her PSR partner Sam when she needed guidance on being empathetic towards others.

Conversely, life lessons were less specific. Nicole described learning to be more confident through her PSR partner, Charlie, which could apply to many situations. Similarly, Rebecca described learning from Castiel as similar to reading fables in that she did not always have a specific problem related to the information Castiel offered, but she knew it would be something she could reference later. Those fable like messages, in some cases, might even fit within the paradigm of memorable messages, or "verbal messages which may be remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives" (Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981, p. 27). Rebecca, who currently does not have children, focused the conversation of life lessons on watching Castiel (her PSR partner) and Jack's parent-child relationship develop over the course of the show. She described how the instances of parent-child interactions from *Supernatural* have resurfaced and become more present in her mind since she has started thinking about having her own children. While Rebecca did not mention any specific verbal messages from the show about parenthood, it was apparent

through her focus on parent-child relationships and reported thoughts of “will I be a good parent?” that these focused storylines had a major influence on her life, at least in the current moment.

While participants in this study did not report receiving factual input from their PSR partners, it makes sense given the content of *Supernatural* as fantasy television. It is feasible to think factual input can be provided by PSR partners in shows of other genres. For example, soap operas have been used to communicate health messages about HIV/AIDS to viewers, both in the United States (Kennedy, O’Leary, Beck, Pollard, & Simpson, 2006) and abroad (Brown, Kiruswa, & Fraser, 2003). Thus, PSR partners can provide various forms of informational support to viewers, including specific advice on how to handle a situation, more generalized life lessons, and potentially factual input.

Emotional Support

In this study, emotional support primarily presented itself in the form of comfort. While comfort is not always included in the conceptualization of emotional support, defined by Cutrona and Suhr (1994) as expressions of caring, concern, empathy, and sympathy, participants like Hannah directly linked the concepts together, calling her PSR partner, Castiel, her “emotional support character” and stating that he is a source of comfort. Yet comfort, as present in this study, did not necessarily consist of comforting messages as defined in the literature (Burlison, 1985) despite having the same function of “alleviating or lessening the emotional distress arising from a variety of everyday hurts and disappointments” (p. 254). Participants did not report feeling comforted by the verbal messages from their PSR partners, but rather by thoughts of their PSR partners and the familiarity of their PSR partners. This appears to straddle emotional support and a less commonly discussed form of support, social presence support (High &

Crowley, 2018). Social presence support is defined as “support that communicates regard, availability, and unity” (High & Crowley, 2018, p. 323), but High and Crowley (2018) emphasize that social presence support is different from emotional support as its primary purpose is not to “attend to people’s affect” (p. 323). As such, social presence support is not meant to help someone deal with their emotions. As already discussed, PSR partners are not capable of intentionally supporting viewers. In this way, social presence support is a better descriptor of the phenomenon reported by participants. However, if a support seeker chooses to engage with their PSR partner for the purpose of alleviating emotional distress rather than just companionship, emotional support is a better descriptor than social presence support. Thus, emotional support provided by PSR partners is best described as a balance between traditional conceptions of emotional support and social presence support.

Social Network Support

The last type of social support participants reported experiencing was social network support, which includes promoting feelings of belonging and “ongoing relationships maintained even when no crisis exists” (du Pré, 2010, p. 169). Social network support appeared in two ways. Many participants received direct support from their PSR partner through feelings of belonging and indirectly from their PSR partner through connections with other network members. An example of a direct feeling of belonging was Kelly’s statement that she feels as if she is a part of her PSR partner’s family. This finding aligns with current literature on PSRs. Hartmann (2016) argued that PSRs can enhance feelings of belonging and several studies support his argument (Derrick et al., 2008, Derrick et al., 2009; Gardner et al., 2005; Iannone et al., 2018). However, PSR partners can also indirectly provide support by connecting viewers together. Alma recounted a story of making a new friend because she happened to notice another woman’s

Supernatural phone case and decided to strike up a conversation. This data suggest that PSR partners are important for receiving social network support beyond the PSR partnerships.

Social networks can be imagined conceptually as a web with links and nodes. Parks and Faw (2014) describe nodes as individual network units (such as people) and links as the relationships between those nodes/people. People can expand their networks by meeting additional people through a common node or across the network link (Parks & Faw, 2014). Plante, Roberts, Reysen, and Gerbasi (2014) argue that fan group participation serves to expand those networks as well as increase social support. Additionally, Blight (2016) found that the presence of a PSR and fandom predicted a higher sense of community. The participants in the present study described their PSR partner playing such a role in their lives. Their love of their PSR partner led to joining fan groups or sparking conversations with strangers who were wearing *Supernatural* merchandise. The base of that new relationship was a shared relationship with a PSR partner. In this way, a common favorite character can be a bonding mechanism which results in a non-PSR and potential new social support providers.

Importance of PSR Support

Given the nature of PSRs, tangible support is the one type out of the core, five types of support a PSR partner cannot provide. This finding, while not surprising giving the definition of tangible support as the giving of goods and services (Cutrona & Suhr, 1994) and the inherent lack of possible physical interaction in PSRs (Horton & Wohl, 1956), is still important. The lack of tangible support in PSRs indicates that PSRs and face-to-face relationships (FTFRs) are not interchangeable. However, this finding, that tangible support is the only type of support not provided by PSR partners, is also important because it emphasizes the similarity between PSRs and FTFRs. Tangible support is only one of five common types of social support, meaning PSRs

are still capable of providing the other four. Researchers have argued that PSRs are fundamentally similar to FTFRs for decades (see Horton & Wohl, 1956). The similarities between PSRs and FTFRs include how they form (Cohen, 1997; Cole & Leets, 1999; Frederick, Lim, Clavio, & Walsh, 2016; Kurtin et al., 2018; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Savage & Spence, 2014) and how they end (Cohen, 2003, 2004; DeGroot & Leith, 2018; Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Lather & Moyer-Gusé, 2011; Tal-Or, 2017). This present research extends those similarities to include the provision of social support. This is important as the benefits of social support are well-documented (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Cohen & Wills, 1985).

While many researchers firmly believe in the importance of support quality over support quantity, there are documented benefits to having more sources of social support (Berkman & Syme, 1979). Seeking social support does not come without risks, including possible negative evaluations of oneself, violation of confidentiality, feeling like a burden, and ineffective or inappropriate support (Goldsmith & Parks, 1990). Having various potential support providers to turn to may help mitigate some these risks or, at least, distribute them among a greater number of relationship partners.

Fortunately, in PSRs, many of these supportive risks are mitigated or entirely eliminated. A PSR partner cannot judge someone, share their secrets and break their confidentiality, or be burdened by the discussion of their problems. Marissa shared this idea in her interview, stating that with her PSR partner Castiel, she did not have to worry “What if I do something wrong and they’re mad at me?” Or “What if they don’t actually like me, and I’m annoying them?” Safe supportive environments where support seekers do not have to worry are important, especially for taboo subjects and vulnerable populations. Younas, Naseem, and Mustafa (2020) investigated a closed Facebook group for women in Pakistan to seek support for taboo topics like abortion

and domestic and sexual abuse. They found that these women only share their stories anonymously, and thus posting in these anonymous groups might be the only way these women receive support. Similarly, Hinck and colleagues (2019) argued that individuals with incarnated loved ones will turn to online support groups to avoid disapproving network members and receive safe support. Just like online social groups provide anonymity and support in these contexts, so might PSR partners. The possibility of PSR partners providing social support expands understandings on how people use media to meet needs by including social support as one of those needs.

However, because they also cannot tailor support to the seeker, it is possible a PSR partner's support could be ineffective. McLaren and High's (2019) research on support gaps, or differences between desired and received support, demonstrated that there can be negative outcomes to support not matching a support seeker's desires, including feelings of hurt and negative relational consequences. Thus, PSR partners are great supplements to face-to-face support providers, but face-to-face support providers are still important for more tailored kinds of support.

The Issue of Reciprocity and Intention

As stated, including PSR partners as support providers challenges traditional understandings of understandings of social support as inherently reciprocal and intentional. However, this study revealed two ways in which participants circumnavigated those requirements to successfully receive social support from their PSRs: *imagined support* and *constructed support*.

Imagined Support

Imagined support is a strategy in which the support seeker imagined a message from a support provider that was not explicitly communicated. As previously discussed, fictional characters cannot intentionally craft supportive messages. However, with this strategy, the message is still crafted with supportive intentions, just on the part of the seeker rather than the provider. For example, in esteem support, Dalia reported imagining what her partner would say to motivate her: “He would tell me to go on.” Dalia could not receive that specific, targeted message from Sam due to the nature of her PSR, but she felt familiar enough with his character to *imagine* how he would support her. Similarly, PSR partners cannot provide direct advice to match a participant’s unique problems of life circumstance, but that did not prevent participants from imagining the advice that their PSR partner would give – and taking it. Joshua reported imagining detailed, four-step advice from Sam (his PSR partner) about how to deal with his anger. Lastly, participants reported being comforted by imagining their PSR partner. This represents a way of garnering emotional support. For example, Kelly created a world of her own where her PSR partners, Sam and Dean, live with her and participate in her everyday life.

While these findings seem to fall outside of traditional requirements of social support, imagined support is not unheard of. Rollins (2010) described children experiencing homesickness imagining what their parents would say to help them as *vicarious support*. However, an additional interpersonal communication theory may be of benefit in exploring the use of imagination in social support. Imagining a conversation with someone in this way can be classified as an *imagined interaction* (Honeycutt, 2015). Honeycutt (2015) defines imagined interactions as “a process of social cognition in which individuals imagine and therefore indirectly experience themselves in anticipated or past communicative encounters with others” (p. 75). According to Honeycutt (2015), there are six functions of imagined interactions:

maintaining relationships, managing conflict, aiding in self-understanding, providing emotional catharsis, and compensating for other interactions. As participants reported using imagined interactions to obtain support, future research should investigate social support as a possible seventh function to imagined interactions.

While it was not present in the results of this study, imagination could also affect the condition of reciprocity. Participants could very well imagine giving advice to their PSR partner rather than just receiving it. Imagined interaction theory research supports this possibility as Edwards, Honeycutt, and Zagacki (1988) found the imaginer does most of the talking within an imagined interaction. Future research should examine the possibility of both giving and receiving social support within an imagined interaction.

Constructed Support

Constructed support differs from imagined support in that constructed support relies solely on canon content from the show while imagined support relies on an individual generating new content external to the show through their imagination. Constructed support requires witnessing a PSR provider's actions and drawing support from those actions. However, constructed support, while observational, is fundamentally different than *lurking support*. Lurkers are those who read supportive messages in online social support groups but do not post. Several studies have found lurking can provide social support benefits (Han et al., 2014; Mo & Coulson, 2010; van Uden-Kraan, Drossaert, Taal, Seydal, & Van de Laar, 2008). Lurking support involves observing support given to others and applying it to a personal situation. Constructed support does not require the observed interaction to be a supportive interaction.

Construction was present in the data for esteem support and informational support. In esteem support, for example, Marissa discussed how Castiel's actions often reminded her of her

own self-worth and autonomy, because his character arc throughout the show is essentially a journey to accepting his own free will. In this example, Castiel does not craft esteem support messages for Marissa or even for other characters on the show. Rather, Castiel is just living his fictional life, and Marissa interpreted and constructed those actions into a form of social support for herself. This is similar to the process Dalia described for receiving informational support from her PSR partner. Dalia reported that when she needs information on how to be empathetic towards someone, she will watch Sam and learn from his actions.

Just like imagined support, constructed support is a way around the requirement of intentionality in social support. PSR partners' actions were not intentionally meant to support the viewers, but viewers found support within those interactions anyway. The ability of these non-support based interactions to provide support is similar to Lakey and Orehek's (2011) assertion that ordinary conversation impacts perceived support. The intention of ordinary conversation is not to make oneself appear more supportive, yet it can have that impact (Lakey et al., 2016; Woods et al., 2016; Hubbard, 2015; Andrews, 2011). The data from this study suggest that ordinary conversation might also provide enacted support with that intentional aspect still absent.

However, unlike imagined support, constructed support does not appear to have the ability to navigate the condition of reciprocity. Future research should explore constructed support in face-to-face interactions as well, to determine if this occurs outside of PSRs. For example, if individuals want support and are unable to find it, will they reinterpret a non-supportive or neutral interaction as supportive one to fulfill their supportive needs?

In summary, PSRs do provide social support in a variety of ways, both directly and indirectly, regardless of whether or not a PSR partner can meet the requirements of reciprocity and intention. As PSR providers can be great supplements to FTFR support providers, the

conceptualization of social support should be extended. Social support should no longer be defined as a strictly reciprocal and intentional process. While intentionality and reciprocity are possible in some social support interactions, they do not define a social support interaction.

Characteristics of Supportive PSR Interactions

In addition to the primary goal of the study (determining the role of PSR partners in social support), this study had two secondary purposes: 1) identify characteristics of supportive PSR interactions and 2) elucidate the different affordances in terms of social support between viewing ordinary conversations and troubles talk.

The results of this study corroborated existing research into characteristics of supportive messages, mainly with respect to Burleson's (1987) message verbal person centeredness (VPC) framework and Andersen's (1999) and later Jones' (Jones & Guerrero, 2001; Bodie & Jones, 2012; Jones & Wirtz, 2007) work on nonverbal immediacy (NVI). Burleson's (1987) VPC framework categorizes supportive messages (typically emotional support messages) by the extent to which a message validates/invalidates a person's feelings and provides/does not provide opportunities for the individual to elaborate upon those feelings. Burleson (2008) concluded that messages high in VPC, or those messages which allow someone to express their feelings, validate those feelings, and additionally explore those feelings, are in general a more effective support message. As participants in the present study identified particular messages high in person centeredness as supportive, this study supports Burleson's (2008) conclusions. For example, Dalia highlighted that her PSR partner, Sam, did not deny his conversational partner Claire's feelings, aligning with the VPC expectation of emotional validation and acknowledgement. Additionally, both Rebecca and Kelly noted that their PSR partners, Castiel and Dean respectively, asked questions intended to allow their conversational partners an

opportunity to explore and elaborate upon their feelings. This is a key feature of highly verbal person-centered messages and has been associated with more beneficial support outcomes (Jones & Wirtz, 2006).

Similarly, the present study supported the previously-established relationships between nonverbal immediacy and more effective support messages. NVI behaviors include nonverbal cues which “reflect empathy, interpersonal warmth, and psychological closeness” (Jones & Guerrero, 2001, p. 568). Participants in this study identified several nonverbal behaviors as supportive, such as touch, leaning in/moving closer, and eye contact/attentive facial expressions, in their PSR partners’ interactions with other characters, all of which are examples of nonverbally immediate behaviors (Andersen, 1999). Specific examples of NVI from the results include Alma’s identification of Dean crossing a room to sit next to Castiel, as well as Grace’s description of Castiel laying a hand on Jack’s shoulder during a conversation.

Participants also highlighted environmental aspects of supportive interaction, such as who was or was not present for the interaction, interaction timing, and the relational history between conversational partners, as important elements of support. While the participants of this study did not characterize environmental aspects as nonverbal behavior, according to Jones and Wirtz (2006), the environment of the interaction and nonverbal immediacy are closely linked. Jones and Wirtz (2006) state, “immediacy behaviors, such as close proxemic distancing, forward lean, and direct body orientation, might be particularly important in generating a supportive environment because these behaviors are approach behaviors that demonstrate positive affect, liking, warmth, and conversational involvement” (p. 221). Thus, the nonverbal behaviors participants in the present study identified, can also be considered environmental factors.

In addition, other environmental factors can be associated with levels or effectiveness of support. House (1981) asserts that in work settings, cooperative environments are better than competitive environments. The physical layout of an environment also has the potential to influence interactions (Altman, 1975). The reason the environment of a supportive interaction is important is that “positive experiences of self ... [are] contingent on a social environment that provides opportunities of belonging, acting, or contributing and of receiving favourable feedback” (Marmot, Siegrist, & Theorell, 2006, p.). Thus, the example from a participant who described Castiel fostering a supportive environment by waiting for Dean to leave before giving Jack support is an instance of creating an environment where Jack could feel like he belonged.

In addition to corroborating previous findings of VPC and NVI as characteristics of effective support messages, the previous research also extends the VPC and NVI frameworks by considering them within a new context—that of parasocial relationships. This extension suggests that VPC and NVI have broader applicability beyond face-to-face supportive interactions or even interactions between two people. The present study looked at ordinary conversations (Lakey & Orehek, 2011), in which giving or seeking support is not the explicit interaction focus, as well as troubles talks, where support is a primary goal. Across these distinct types of interactions, elements of VPC and NVI were present, indicating that message VPC and NVI might be important considerations when evaluating non-support-based conversations as well as support-based conversations.

While the social support characteristics participants in this study identified generally spoke to VPC and NVI, participants also identified opposing characteristics as supportive. These opposing characteristics are evidence of Goldsmith’s (2004) normative view. One of Goldsmith’s key assumptions is that support can be evaluated and experienced differently by

different people, and that all supportive interactions are situated within the context of a relationship (Goldsmith, 2004). In the less common instances of support where messages low in VPC and NVI were judged as supportive, participants tended to explain their evaluations as stemming from their understanding of the relationship context. A key example of this is exhibited in Dalia's articulation of why it was beneficial for Sam, an adult male, to remain seated while providing support for a teenage girl, Claire, with whom he did not have a familial or close relationship at the time. Dalia specified that, had Sam been the one standing and moving around the room and, perhaps, moving into Claire's space, he could have come across as intimidating rather than supportive. These apparent outliers are actually very well explained by the normative approach, further evidencing how social support within a parasocial context shares many similarities to social support in face-to-face contexts. The factors used to evaluate face-to-face interactions are also used to evaluate parasocial interactions.

Affordances of Ordinary Conversation and Troubles Talk

Participants identified the characteristics of supportive messages in both ordinary conversation scenes and troubles talk scenes. But this study sought to answer if participants use both of those scenes for social support and how that support differs. RRT argues that witnessing ordinary conversation between others increases positive affect (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). The present study supports this notion, as participants reported ordinary conversation scenes involving their PSR partner made them smile, laugh, and just feel good. While this finding extends RRT's claim to include the context of PSR partners' conversations, it is also practically important knowledge. As scenes and clips from television shows are readily available on the internet through video platforms such as YouTube, people can use their PSR partner for a quick mood boost by revisiting their PSR partner's ordinary conversations.

In addition to eliciting positive affect, ordinary conversation also served as a conduit for escapism and as a way to relate to others. Several participants reported that watching ordinary conversation scenes allowed them to escape from their real-world problems by momentarily forgetting them. Escapism, while not directly connected to any of the five types of social support, is an affordance of watching ordinary conversation scenes. PSRs are one phenomena of media consumption, but there are others. For example, escapism appears to be a product of *transportation* (Gerrig, 1993), which describes the experience of immersion or losing oneself in a narrative world. This finding emphasizes that while PSRs can provide social support, not every interaction with a PSR partner is an instance of social support, just like with any other type of relationships.

While social network support, which instilled feelings of belonging in participants and created and maintained participants' social connections, fostered relationships, ordinary conversation scenes provided surface-level material with which to make momentary connections with others. Participants reported that they would reference dialogue from ordinary conversation scenes as a shorthand to relate to other fans of *Supernatural*. While this did not necessarily result in the long term relationships participants mentioned as a result of social network support, it is a similar function.

Interestingly, relating to others was the single common function assigned to both ordinary conversation and troubles talk. Instead of referencing jokes or lines from ordinary conversation scenes, participants used the strong emotions present in troubles talk scenes to briefly connect with others. This affordance (relating to others) of both ordinary conversation scenes and troubles talk scenes could potentially be a way of obtaining several types of social support. Sharing a joke with someone – and having them laugh in return – might be representative of

esteem support as it likely validates an individual and boosts their confidence. Humor has previously been linked to higher self-esteem (Ho, 2016). It could also be social network support, as it offers a brief moment of community (du Pré, 2010). On the flipside, connecting with others about a strong emotional troubles talk scene might also be esteem support (Holmstrom, 2015). One participant described wanting others to validate her own emotional reaction to a troubles talk scene. However, if someone is looking to feel better, relating to others might better be characterized as emotional support (MacGeorge et al., 2011).

While the presence of one similarity between ordinary conversation scenes and troubles talk scenes is nothing to dismiss, it does not conclusively answer to what extent ordinary conversation and troubles talk scenes offer similar benefits. More compelling is participants' characterization of troubles talk scenes as cathartic. Multiple studies have found cathartic experiences such as swearing (Popusoi, Havârneanu, & Havârneanu, 2018) and crying (Bylsma, Vingerhoets, & Rottenberg, 2008) increased positive affect and/or decreased negative affect. However, the meaning of catharsis as used in these studies does not quite match what participants in this study meant by the term. Nichols and Zax (1977) defined catharsis as "a process that relieves tension and anxiety by expressing emotions" (p. 1). However, the participants in the present study did not express their own emotions, but instead watched others (their PSR partners) express their own emotions. This matches Copeland and Slater's (1985) articulation of *vicarious catharsis*. While Copeland and Slater (1985) focused on vicarious catharsis through watching acts of violence on television, they argue that vicarious catharsis could apply to the relief of other emotions as well, such as sadness and frustration. Thus, ordinary conversation and troubles talk scenes are not only similar through their affordance of relating to others, but also through their respective effects on positive affect. This finding

supports RRT which states that affect regulation is not limited to ordinary conversation (Lakey & Orehek, 2011).

Supporting and Extending Theory

In addition to the results from the specific research questions already presented, this study extends theory in a few more key ways. First, participant responses support several key principles of RRT. RRT claims that support is relational, which means that a support recipient will vary in their judgements of support from different providers, with a relational provider eliciting “affect, action, or thought in a recipient that is not characteristic of how the recipient typically responds to other providers and is not characteristic of what the provider typically elicits in other recipients” (Lakey & Orehek, 2011, p. 3). Therefore, uncommon responses to a provider are relational. Many participants reported their relationship, thoughts about the relationship, and feelings towards their PSR partner were unusual for them – at least unusual for a fictional character. Megan in particular described that seeing Dean was like looking in a mirror, in that seeing him happy made her happy, and seeing him heartbroken broke her heart. She went on to describe that real people often bring out such empathetic responses in her, but Dean as a fictional character was unique in having that ability.

Joshua echoed these thoughts in regard to his relationship with Sam. He described his PSR with Sam as a “one-time thing,” and that his connection with Sam is “significantly stronger” than any other fictional character. When describing their unusual strength of feelings towards their PSR partners, none of the participants described receiving unusually effective support from a PSR partner but focused more on affective responses. While this study did not ask whether participants also received support from other fictional characters both in *Supernatural* and in other media texts, that is a question worthy of further exploration. Several studies (Lakey et.,

2016; Andrews, 2011; Hubbard, 2015) have linked relational relationships to increased perceived supportiveness. The finding in this study that PSRs are relational suggests that support from PSR partners might be perceived to be more supportive than non-PSR characters.

Lastly, RRT assumes that thinking about a provider is enough to elicit positive affect (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). Thus far, research has supported this claim for different types of support providers, including mothers, fathers, closest peers (Woods, Lakey, and Sain, 2016), and roommates (Lakey et al., 2016). The present study extends this claim to include PSR partners. During interviews, participants spent much of their time thinking and talking about their PSR partner before watching the two scenes. When participants talked about Sam, Dean, Castiel, or Charlie, they smiled, laughed, and spoke with joy and amusement in their voices. Though the study did not measure changes in affect, the above mentioned behaviors are ways positive affect appeared after thinking about a PSR partner. In summary, this study demonstrates that PSR partners are important providers to consider and continue to explore in RRT.

Limitations

While this study serves to expand current understandings of who/what can be considered a social support provider, the characteristics of supportive messages, and the different affordances of troubles talk and ordinary conversation, it does have limitations. One limitation affecting this study is the structural nature of television. With only forty-five minutes (in the case of an hour long episode timeslot like *Supernatural's*), there is not enough wiggle room in storytelling to include things which do not advance the plot. This means that ordinary conversation scenes (Lakey & Orehek, 2011), or scenes in which characters are not discussing problems, are rare. Ordinary conversation is more likely to be present in short snippets of dialogue rather than a full scene lasting several minutes. Because of this limitation, it is possible

the positive affect elicited by ordinary conversation scenes is boosted by its rarity. By virtue of being rare, ordinary conversation in the context of television is not ordinary at all. To address this limitation, future research could investigate varying kinds of PSR partners, such as celebrities, book characters, and video game characters who might more often be captured in ordinary conversations as well as troubles talk. A more balanced representation of ordinary conversations and troubles talk might lead to more nuanced findings of what each type of conversation offers people in terms of benefits.

Second, the finding that some participants used their PSR partners for informational support regarding how they might offer support to others should be taken carefully. As interview questions centered on 1) participants' evaluations of their PSR partner's supportiveness towards other characters and 2) how participants personally use and think about their PSR partners, it is possible participants conflated the two lines of questioning into this response. In order to address this limitation, this finding should be investigated further in either social support research or PSR research.

Lastly, *Supernatural* is not the most diverse show. Of the four characters represented in this data, all are white; three are cisgendered males (though Castiel is an angel and technically not bound by sex and gender; however, he is represented as male throughout the series); and only one character, the sole woman of the group, Charlie, is canonically confirmed to be LGBTQ.¹ The lack of diversity in *Supernatural* matters, as perceived similarity is a positive predictor of PSRs (Tian & Hoffner, 2010). That may explain the demographics of the study's participants, as most identified as White. However, most participants identified as women rather than men.

¹ However, it is important to note that Castiel as an angel is sometimes considered asexual or queer by many fans, including some of my participants. Likewise, Dean is interpreted by a large swath of fans as bisexual, and many of my participants held this opinion.

While this demographic is not explained by perceived similarity, Kurtin and colleagues (2018) found that physical attraction is positively related to PSRs. During the course of the interviews, several participants did mention finding their PSR partner to be attractive. This limitation could be remedied in the future by examining a show with greater diversity and representation to explore the relationship between social support and PSRs with regards to issues faced by minority individuals, such as people of color and the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, given the fantasy/horror genre of *Supernatural*, many issues represented in the show (the apocalypse, demons, and monsters) are not relevant to everyday life. A similar study engaging with another genre such as sitcoms might better explore PSR social support and everyday problems and circumstances.

Future Directions

In addition to future studies addressing the above limitations, there are several questions left unexplored. While the present study explored social support and PSRs, and previous studies by Lakey and colleagues (2014) have addressed support in parasocial interactions, what is missing from the literature is a comparison of the quality and effectiveness of support in a PSR versus in a parasocial interaction. This research is important, as Hartmann (2016) has articulated PSRs and PSIs are distinct yet often conflated. A parasocial interaction occurs only in the moment of viewing; it is a fleeting connection marked by the viewer feeling as if the media personality is talking directly to them (Hartmann, 2016). However, parasocial relationships extend beyond the moment of viewing, just like a friendship exists when friends are not currently interacting. If PSIs and PSRs differ in support quality, researchers will be able to make better practical recommendations for seeking support from fictional characters. For example, if PSIs are found to be more supportive, individuals might hesitate to foster PSR development. This

research will further clarify the differences between PSIs and PSRs as well as add to the expansion of social support conceptions advanced by the present study. This research might also benefit from a comparison of social support versus self-care. Without a strong PSR with a fictional character, a media viewer might turn to a media text for self-care rather than support.

In addition, future research should continue to explore the role of PSRs in each type of social support, but, specifically, in regards to social network support. The findings of the present study suggested that PSRs, and by extension fandom, are important intermediaries through which people make connections to others. PSR partners appear to function as nodes (Parks & Faw, 2014) within a network, linking participants to other people. As the study also did not find evidence for PSRs ability to provide tangible support, it would be interesting to explore if individuals turn to the networks they create through their PSR partners for tangible support.

Third, the boundaries of social support research should continue to be pushed, particularly through the exploration of the role of imagination in other interactions (Honeycutt, 2015). If imagination allows PSR partners to support individuals, it is possible that the imagination could provide support in other relationships. Lastly, I emphasize the importance of qualitative research for both social support and PSR studies. If participants are given the opportunity to describe social support in their own words, including where and how they access it when needed, researchers might find new contexts beyond in-person relationships, online support groups, and PSRs that individuals activate for support. As for PSRs, this study clarified that there is a distinct lack of scholarship exploring how individuals interact with a PSR partner, including what role their PSR partner plays in their everyday life and when/why/how individuals think about their PSR partner. Exploring this missing pieces in PSR research requires conversations with individuals, not just measurements of the strength of a relationship.

Conclusion

In summary, this study explored PSR partners as providers of social support and found evidence for the provision of esteem support through motivation and reminders of self-worth, informational support through advice and life lessons, emotional support through comfort, and social network support through creating/maintaining connections and feelings of belonging. The finding that PSR partners can provide specific types of support challenges current conceptualizations of social support as inherently reciprocal and intentional, potentially extending scholarly understandings of who/what can be a source of social support.

This study also added to the literature regarding characteristics of supportive messages, with qualitative data corroborating existing understandings of supportive messages such as message VPC and NVI. The results demonstrate that participants isolated characteristics of high person-centered messages as integral parts of a message's supportive valence (Burleson, 2008).

Similar to participants' isolation of VPC characteristics, participants also noted nonverbal behaviors which increased their evaluations of a conversation as supportive. These reported nonverbal behaviors match elements of nonverbal immediacy, including eye contact, body orientation, closeness, and expressions of concern (Jones & Guerrero, 2011). However, participants also reported that what is supportive in one situation might not be supportive in another, which aligns with the normative approach to social support (Goldsmith, 2004). Depending on the relationship between two people, touch may not be appropriate, and a support provider will give more effective support at a distance.

The nature of the problem also influenced participants' evaluations of a supportive response. For problems that had feasible solutions, persistence in helping and providing support was viewed as supportive, while for problems without feasible solutions, participants' viewed

enforcing normalcy as a more supportive response. The last pairing of opposite supportive messages was a provider either relating to the recipient or providing an alternative perspective. Like with evaluating physical touch and persistence, participants appeared to rely on a judgement call of whether or not it was appropriate to agree and relate to someone or provide them with an alternative perspective.

In addition to characteristics of VPC and NVI, participants also reported that the environment of the interaction, including who was or was not present, the timing of the message, and the relational history of the conversational partners, all influenced the supportive nature of the message. In general, these evaluations were about creating the most comfortable and safe environment for a support recipient in order for a provider to give the most effective support.

Lastly, this study merged psychology's RRT and communication studies' normative approach to explore social support in both ordinary and troubled contexts, finding that while there are differences between what each affords, there are also similarities. Participants reported that ordinary conversations (Lakey & Orehek, 2011) generally improved their mood. Watching ordinary conversation scenes was also a method by which participants reported escaping and forgetting their current real-life problems. In contrast, participants reported troubles talk scenes (Goldsmith, 2004) as cathartic, or a way to engage with their own emotions through someone else's emotions. The sole similarity between ordinary conversation scenes and troubles talk scenes was both types of scenes gave participants material with which to relate to others. Ordinary conversation scenes provided participants material for inside jokes while troubles talk scenes gave participants a reference point for relating to others through a shared emotional experience.

While this study contributed to understandings of PSRs and extended conceptions of social support, there is one additional takeaway: a reaffirmed, long held belief, that characters are not just characters – they are friends.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Recruitment Flyer

Who can participate?
Adults (18+) who are big fans of *Supernatural*.

What will I do?
Complete a short survey, and if you qualify, completed an interview!


What will I get?
If you complete the interview, you will receive a \$10 gift card!

SUPERNATURAL FRIENDSHIPS
A Research Study

Are angels, demons, and Winchesters more than characters to you?
Would you even call them *friends*?

Participate in a study where you can share your insights and experiences as a big fan of *Supernatural*!

Interested? Visit: http://colostate.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4IS612QSX1ppxFr
Or email: Kayla.L.Thomas@colostate.edu



APPENDIX B: PARASOCIAL INTERACTION SCALE AND DEMOGRAPHICS

1. Who is your favorite character in *Supernatural*?
2. How long have you been watching *Supernatural*? Round to the nearest year.

Please answer questions 3-20 on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being *strongly disagree*, 2 *disagree*, 3 *neutral*, 4 *agree*, and 5 *strongly agree*.

3. *Supernatural* shows me what the characters are like.
4. When the characters joke around with other characters, it makes *Supernatural* easier to watch.
5. When my favorite character shows me how he or she feels, it helps me make up my own mind about how I feel.
6. I feel sorry for my favorite character when he or she makes a mistake.
7. When I'm watching *Supernatural*, I feel as if I am part of the characters' group.
8. I like to compare my ideas with what my favorite character says.
9. The characters make me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.
10. I like hearing the voice of my favorite character in my home.
11. My favorite character keeps me company when *Supernatural* is on.
12. I look forward to watching my favorite character in *Supernatural* episodes.
13. If my favorite character appeared on another television program, I would watch that program.
14. I sometimes make remarks to my favorite character during *Supernatural*.
15. If there were a story about my favorite character in a newspaper/magazine or online, I would read it.
16. I miss seeing my favorite character when *Supernatural* is not on.
17. I would like to meet my favorite character in person.
18. I think my favorite character is like an old friend.
19. I find my favorite character to be attractive.
20. I am not as satisfied when my favorite character is not in an episode of *Supernatural*.

Demographics

21. What is your age?
Participants will fill in a text box.
22. What is your gender identity? Select all that apply.
[Woman]
[Man]
[Transgender]
[Non-binary]
[Other]
[Prefer not to respond]
23. What is your race/ethnicity? Select all that apply.
[American Indian or Alaskan Native]

[Asian]
[Black or African American]
[Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander]
[White]
[Hispanic or Latinx or of Spanish Origin]
[Prefer not to respond]

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction:

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study. You have completed the informed consent document and questionnaire. Do you have any questions about the informed consent? Do you have any questions about the content or purpose of this study? As I noted, you are a volunteer and your continued participation in this study is voluntary. You can end the interview at any time. At this time, do you wish to proceed? Do you consent to the audio of this interview being recorded? The length of this interview is approximately 60 minutes, and we will be exploring your experiences with and perceptions of characters from *Supernatural*.

Preliminary Questions:

1. You identified _____ as your favorite character. Why did you choose him/her?
 - a. What qualities does _____ possess that you like?
 - b. Can you give me an example of a time they displayed one or several of those qualities?
 - c. How did you feel about _____ in that moment?
2. Would you describe _____ as a supportive individual?
 - a. Can you describe a situation in which _____ supported another character or a time that made you believe they are a supportive individual?
 - b. Of the qualities you described earlier, do any of those play a role in viewing _____ as a supportive individual?
 - c. If you don't find _____ supportive, why not?
 - i. What qualities are they lacking?
 - ii. Is there a certain behavior or moment you can point to?
3. When you are not watching the show, do you think about _____?
 - a. In what contexts do you think about _____?
 - i. What are you doing?
 - ii. What are you feeling?
 - b. Can you give me an example of a specific time you thought about _____?
 - i. Were you experiencing a hardship or a problem?
 - ii. What specifically did you think about in regards to _____?
 - c. Did thinking about _____ help you in any way?
 - d. Do you find _____ comforting in difficult times? How so?
 - e. Does drawing upon _____ in a time of need change your perception of _____ as a supportive individual? Why or why not?
 - f. Does this happen with other characters from *Supernatural* or is it exclusively/mostly with _____?
 - g. Having reflected upon _____, do you think of them similarly to how you do real life relationships? Why or why not?
4. Let's imagine for a moment _____ is real and a part of your life. What role would they play?
 - a. Would you call upon them in situations you described earlier?

- b. What would you discuss with _____?
 - i. Are there any problems you would talk to them about?
 - ii. How do you imagine they would respond?
 - iii. Do you think you would feel supported by _____? In what way would you feel supported?

Watch Ordinary Conversation Scene

1. How does this conversation make you feel?
 - a. How does it make you feel about _____?
2. What qualities of _____'s are displayed here?
 - a. How so? What are they saying or doing that makes you see those qualities?
 - b. What aspects of the conversation indicate that they are supportive? Or do they seem unsupportive? Consider both verbal and nonverbal behavior.
3. Again, imagine this is real, and you are _____'s conversational partner. How would you feel?
 - a. Would you feel supported? Why or why not?
 - b. Would you want _____ to respond to you any different? If so, how?
4. Have you ever thought about a scene similar to this when not watching the show?
 - a. If yes, what made you think of it?
 - b. What scene was it?
 - c. How did thinking about it make you feel?

Watch Trouble Talk Scene

1. How does this conversation make you feel?
 - a. How does it make you feel about _____?
2. What qualities of _____'s are displayed here?
 - a. How so? What are they saying or doing that makes you see those qualities?
 - b. What aspects of the conversation indicate that they are supportive? Or do they seem unsupportive? Consider both verbal and nonverbal behavior.
3. Again, imagine this is real, and you are _____'s conversational partner. How would you feel?
 - a. Would you feel supported? Why or why not?
 - b. Would you want _____ to respond to you any different? If so, how?
4. Have you ever thought about a scene similar to this when not watching the show?
 - a. If yes, what made you think of it?
 - b. What scene was it?
 - c. How did thinking about it make you feel?

Conclude:

Thank you again for participating in this study and taking the time to speak with me. If you have any further questions, you may email me at kayla.l.thomas@colostate.edu