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For Some, TV Cures Loneliness

By REUTERS

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LOS ANGELES (Hollywood Reporter) - Watching TV might not make you happy, but for some viewers it beats being alone.

Four new studies by the University at Buffalo and Miami University of Ohio found that watching TV can drive away feelings of loneliness and rejection. The studies are reported in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology and suggest that watching TV provides viewers with the illusion that their social needs are being met.

"The research provides evidence for the 'social surrogacy hypothesis,' which holds that humans can use technologies, like television, to provide the experience of belonging when no real belongingness has been experienced," said one of the study's authors, Shira Gabriel. "We also argue that other commonplace technologies such as movies, music or interactive video games, as well as television, can fulfill this need."

The first study found that subjects felt less lonely when viewing their favorite TV shows. Study 2 found that subjects whose "belongingness needs were aroused" wrote longer essays about their favored TV programs. The third study found that thinking about favored TV programs buffered subjects against drops in self-esteem, increases in negative mood and feelings of rejection. And Study 4 found that subjects verbally expressed fewer feelings of loneliness after writing essays about their preferred TV programs.

Researchers concluded that a viewer's fictional bond with TV characters can help ease their need to connect with others. The study authors noted, however, that "it remains an open question whether social surrogacy suppresses belongingness needs or actually fulfills them." They acknowledge that "the kind of social surrogacy provoked by these programs can be a poor substitution for 'real' human-to-human experience."

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

A previous study found that unhappy people watch more TV, while those who consider themselves happy spend more time reading and socializing.

(Editing by Sheri Linden at Reuters)

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