I, Stephanie Whitenack, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication.

It is entitled:
An Examination of Parasocial Relationships and Loneliness among People with Down Syndrome

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An Examination of Parasocial Relationships and Loneliness among People with Down Syndrome

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MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

This study explored parasocial relationships using nine dyadic, in-depth interviews with the caregiver and their family member with Down syndrome (DS). The interviews focused on the people with DS’s relationship with their favorite media character, and how they integrated these characters in their daily lives. Parasocial relationship theory was used to examine if people with DS use self-talk to foster parasocial relationships, if they used parasocial relationships as a coping mechanism, and/or how parasocial relationships with media characters affected their overall well-being.

A thematic analysis revealed five emerging themes. Findings indicate that people with DS use self-talk as a way to foster parasocial relationships. Also, the data suggests that these people with DS may use parasocial relationships to express feelings and practice interpersonal social skills. Findings from this current study add to the parasocial literature by examining parasocial relationships in people with DS, and how they utilize these relationships when experiencing feelings of isolation or loneliness.
Introduction

People with developmental disabilities are an overlooked population within media and communication research. Developmental disabilities come in a wide array. One that is particularly complex due to physical differences and language delays is Down syndrome (DS). According to the Global Down Syndrome Foundation (2012), DS is the least funded major genetic condition researched by the National Institute of Health despite being the most frequent chromosomal disorder. With this population being overlooked and understudied, there is a need to explore disabilities, particularly within the field of communication. Specifically, the utility of relationships and interpersonal communication of people with DS should be examined since people with developmental disabilities have a difficult time gaining friends because of a host of different issues associated with their disability. Children or people with the lowest developmental levels experience a difficulty in obtaining friends (Sloper, Turner, Knussen, & Cunningham, 1990). This may occur because an inadequate developmental level may not be able to cultivate the necessary skills to gain and maintain social relationships. Compared to their peers without disabilities, young school children with disabilities are less often chosen as friends because they display lower levels of communication competence that are disproportionate to their developmental level (Guralnick, 1990). In addition to low developmental levels and lack of expressive language, people with disabilities may experience difficulty accessing relationships where immediate interaction is not fostered, such as a classroom setting. For example, people with disabilities may have a hard time maintaining friends outside of the classroom because they rely on their parents or caregivers to create a social atmosphere that is not otherwise accessible.
People with DS are ostracized from experiencing interpersonal relationships that non-disabled people experience because of language and cognitive delay (Buckley, Bird, & Sacks, 2002). While academic inclusion has increased in most schools, and people with DS are making great strides with language, behavior, and academics, social inclusion still seems to be problematic in the lives of these individuals (D’Haem, 2008). Cuckle and Wilson (2002) reported in a study concerning social inclusion that while people with DS have some friends in school, only a small number of cases extended into friendships outside of school. In a another study, Pollock and Stewart (1990) found that young adults with disabilities were found to engage in passive, solitary leisure activities such as listening to music, watching television, doing arts and crafts, and playing computer games. Pollack and Stewart’s research identifies that children with DS have few friends outside of school and that most of these ‘friends’ are acquaintances rather than close friends. Because children with DS struggle to preserve friendships outside of school they are vulnerable to social isolation. According to Buckley et al. (2002), people who are socially isolated are more vulnerable to depression and less able to cope with inevitable life crises. When people with DS are socially isolated, they are dependent on themselves to cope with their feelings of isolation and loneliness.

One way to cope with isolation and loneliness is through self-talk or imaginary companions. According to Faccini (2010), the largest sample of adults with imaginary companions (defined as an invisible character named in conversations with other persons that do not physically exist) is adults with DS. The function of imaginary companions for people with DS was reported in Faccini’s study as primarily positive and adaptive. This adaptive talk with an imaginary companion through conversation is considered to be ‘self-talk’ or ‘private speech’ (i.e. talking out loud to self). Today, there is a negative connotation
associated with people with DS using self-talk as a way to cope because they are stigmatized for expressing themselves this way in a public setting and are sometimes judged to be mentally unstable by outsiders. However, according to McGuire, Chicoine, and Greenbaum (1997), self-talk plays an essential role in the cognitive development of all children with and without intellectual disabilities.

Self-talk is used by most young children to work through problems, feelings, and emotions, and holds the same purpose for people with DS. However, because people with DS are at a greater risk for social isolation, they may rely on self-talk more often to deal with sadness or frustration. McGuire et al. (1997) expand on this further by arguing that:

Adults with Down syndrome use self-talk to cope, to vent, and to entertain themselves and should not be viewed as a medical problem or mental illness. Indeed, self-talk may be one of the few tools available to adults with Down syndrome for asserting control over their lives and improving their sense of well-being. (p. 4)

People with DS may also use media as a way to diminish feelings of loneliness and enhance time spent alone. Research on self-talk can provide insight to understanding how people perceive relationships with media characters as a developmental and constructive tool for people with DS. This study aims to identify links between self-talk and parasocial relationships by investigating qualitative descriptions of self-talk behaviors involving media characters and parasocial relationships. Furthermore, the research aims to explore how parasocial relationships may affect with the overall well-being of people with DS.
Literature review

Understanding Down Syndrome

Down syndrome is a chromosomal abnormality that is characterized by a full or partial copy of the 21st chromosome. According to the National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS), the additional genetic material alters the course of development and causes physical and mental characteristic abnormalities. These characteristics are recognizable and typical in most people with the disability. John Langdon Down first described the characteristics of the syndrome in 1866, and nearly a century later in 1959 Jérôme Lejeune, a French scientist, described it as a genetic condition caused by trisomy (having a third chromosome) on chromosome 21. Aside from distinct physical features such as low muscle tone, a slightly flattened facial profile, and an upward slant in the eyes (Nation Down Syndrome Society), Down syndrome also affects the development of language, learning, and memory in these individuals (Carlesimo, Marotta, & Vicari, 1997). In order to work through daily activities and frustrations, people with DS may use self-talk as entertainment and a way to manage stressors that may occur throughout their daily lives.

Self-Talk Behavior in People with Down Syndrome

Few studies have been conducted on self-talk behavior in people with developmental disabilities. For people with DS, some evidence suggests that self-talk maybe an important aspect of their thought processes to work through difficult situations, express feelings, and entertain themselves (McGuire et al., 1997). Patti, Andiloro, and Gavin (2009) examined self-talk among children and adults with DS using a self-talk survey they developed to investigate the quality, style, and content of their interactions. Parents from Canada and the United Kingdom were recruited to take part in the self-talk survey (N=162) regarding their
child with DS (children’s ages ranged from 5-60 years old). The analysis revealed that self-talk was reported by 91% of the participants. Furthermore, they found that 24% of the self-talk was directed to someone famous, and 46% of the sample frequently talked about a favorite television program or movie. According to Patti et al. (2009):

A favorite movie or television program as the focus of self-talk had the third highest incidence. It is speculated that some self-talkers develop a close bond with a movie or television character and confide in that ‘person’ during their self-talk. (p. 6)

Although the instances of talking directly to famous people was less in comparison to the children with DS talking to himself/herself, an acquaintance, or with an imaginary companion, yet media focused self-talk may be more prevalent because parents may not perceive what programs their child is talking about, and are unsure with whom their child is self-talking. Thus, it is not clear how many children with DS actually talk to a famous media characters. McGuire et al., (1997) provides evidence that self-talk is not only exhibited by people with DS, but it may serve as frequent entertainment for these individuals when they are alone for long periods of time. While self-talk is beneficial for people with DS, the perception of self-talk to outsiders can further widen the gap of stigmatization to a group that is already ostracized at the most basic level of interaction because of their physical differences. In a society where normality is valued, people with DS who self-talk may attract negative attention that can overshadow other traits that could group them with familiar social categories (Green, 2003). Once individuals are grouped into a social category based upon their negatively attributed differences, stigmatization can ensue.
The Stigmatization of People with Down Syndrome

By definition, persons with a stigma are perceived as not “normal”, and on this assumption, people exercise a variety of discrimination, through which they effectively create an ideology to explain people’s inferiority and potential danger he/she represents to society (Goffman, 1963). People with DS represent an uncontrollability (threat) to a society that desires structure and control over their interactions with others. People without disabilities attribute neediness and lack of control to people with disabilities, which permits those individuals to perceive themselves as having more strength and control in their lives than they may actually experience (Fine & Asch, 1988).

Link and Phelan (2001) further conceptualized “stigma” and how the cognitive processes along with the act of exclusion exist between society and a stigmatized group. They explicate the component parts of stigma by stating, “stigma exists when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separating, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows these processes to unfold” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 367). Social identifiers like race, social class, and disability are differences that are often stigmatized. The process of labeling and stereotyping occurs when social selection is used to identify what differences matter socially and, consequently, those labels are then linked to a stereotype (Link & Phelan, 2001). The third component of stigma is separation, which occurs when there is an “us” versus “them” dichotomy (Link & Phelan, 2001). Today, people with DS can be considered a part of the “them” dynamic because people label negative attributes of the group’s identity and, as a result, they can tend to be defined by their disability (i.e., “she is a Down’s kid”, or “he is retarded”). However, people that are a part of the “us” dynamic with an illness have an illness that does not have a negative attribute associated with their
identity. The fourth and fifth components defined by Link and Phelan are status loss and discrimination, which occur when individuals are labeled, set apart, and linked to undesirable attributions, this constitutes a rational for exclusion, rejection, and devaluation of the stigmatized group. Because people with DS are seen as inferior by society’s standards of “normal”, the components of stigma are able to materialize during the most basic exchange between the discriminator and the people who are recipients of discriminatory reactions, resulting in the stigmatization of people with DS.

Down syndrome is a disability that can be easily identified by others at the most basic level of exchange between two people. According to Cunningham and Glenn (2004), the two most common distinctive characteristics of Down syndrome are physical appearance and intellectual deficiency. These identifying characteristics are neither valued nor accepted in most cultures. People with intellectual disabilities may take these criticisms and rejections and turn them into a perceived self-stigma. As a result, social isolation may occur because the person with the disability is “rejected” by the non-disabled, but may reject others like themselves who are also perceived as different (Cunningham & Glenn, 2004).

If people with DS have social experiences that are consistently negative and defined by the stigmatization of their disability, it can consequently have negative effects on their self-esteem and self-representation. The concept of self is based on social and cognitive constructs. Individual’s understanding of themselves, others, and the world changes with cognitive growth and social experience (Cunningham & Glenn, 2004). If a person has cognitive dissonance in regards to one’s self, it can carry over into their interpersonal relationships. According to Jones and Ince (2001):
Because dissonance threatens the self-concept, it is logical to suggest that dissonant individuals would be likely to have alterations in interpersonal perception or assert themselves against another individual than would non-dissonant individuals. (p.45)

Stigmatized individuals may feel anxiety when entering the immediate presence of a non-disabled being. This hesitation can be attributed to the anxiety or anticipation of how the non-disabled person will identify and receive him/her (Goffman, 1963). The stigmas that people with DS experience can widen the threat for social isolation and can have detrimental effects on their mental health and development.

For example, individuals with DS have impaired social skills, which according to Stanberry (2008), can prevent them from having successful relationships with family and peers. According to Spitzberg and Cupach (2011), interpersonal skills are vital to the initiation and maintenance of relationships, and if individuals lack these skills, social anxiety, loneliness, and depression may arise. Communication scholars refer to this as communication competence, which addresses the skills needed for optimal interpersonal functioning (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). These skills include verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are socially acceptable and, when used correctly, will likely elicit a positive response from others (Osman & Blinder, 1995).

People with learning disabilities, such as DS, may have a hard time processing what others say and may also have a hard time expressing themselves through language. Therefore, it is important for people with DS to develop communication competence in order to create interpersonal relationships with others. According to Hassold and Patterson (1999) many children with DS have more advanced receptive language skills than expressive language skills. Receptive skills are related to comprehension and being able
to understand conversations and situations, while expressive language skills are how well individuals are able to verbally express their thoughts and feelings in response to the conversation or situation. If a child has a hard time communicating through language, they may become upset, frustrated, and discouraged from communicating with others. McCroskey (1977) refers to this phenomenon as communication apprehension, which is defined as an individual’s level of fear or anxiety when anticipating an interaction with another. Higher levels of communication apprehension are positively correlated with avoidance and can be detrimental in the creation of interpersonal relationships (McCroskey, 1977). In the instance of communication apprehension, McCroskey (1977) further explicates that trait apprehension is characterized by fear or anxiety of many different forms of social encounters. While trait apprehension is not hereditary, it is a learned state that is conditioned and reinforced by the individual’s communication behaviors (McCroskey, 1977). Therefore, if an individual’s silence is reinforced and verbal communication is not, then the individual may develop higher levels of apprehension and have a tendency to avoid verbal exchanges with others.

According to McCroskey (1977) individuals who have high levels of apprehension are likely to develop lower levels of communication and social skills than their peers since avoidance at an early age would have limited their communication experiences. A study conducted by Van Gameren-Oosterom et al. (2013) assessed the degree to which people with DS master practical and social skills, and concluded that while adolescents with DS tended to acquire skills for independent functioning, they also had serious deficiencies with social skills. From their findings, the researchers imply that people with DS experience difficulty in adapting to social situations where they have to interact with others in an unfamiliar circumstance, thus limiting their social engagement and activities outside the home (Van...
Gameren-Oosterom et al., 2013). They also conclude that people with DS may function better when they have the social support of a familiar caregiver in the home; however, they suggest that this can be problematic as the need for social support does not decrease as the child enters adulthood (Van Gameren-Oosterom et al., 2013). While the constant social support from a caregiver is ideal, it is not realistic for the entirety of a person with DS’s adult life.

According to Stanberry (2012), parents can help teach their children social skills by encouraging role-playing. People with DS can practice and improve specific social skills by rehearsing their behaviors in “pretend” situations. Practicing these interactions behind closed doors can improve their social skills in real life situations (Judd, 2012). Self-talk is an example of pretend situations people with DS may use in order to improve social skills or use to work through frustrating daily events; however, in some circumstances, self-talk may be very loud or threatening (McGuire et al., 1997). Hostile self-talk, which can be harmless for the person with DS, may create an environment where non-disabled people deter potential interactions. While generating and maintaining interpersonal relationships are crucial for people with DS, self-talk may act as a deterrent for interactions to occur and may lead to stress, loneliness, and isolation.

**Coping and Social Support**

According to Miller and Kaiser (2001), stigma can increase the amount of stressors stigmatized individuals experience and can be detrimental to their well-being if the individuals are unable to cope successfully. People with DS must find a way to manage stressful circumstances where interpersonal relationships are unattainable. When an individual with Down syndrome experiences instances of exclusion or isolation, they must
take it upon themselves to find a way to lessen or manage the stress through coping. According to Tardy (1994), coping involves both problem solving (what can be changed), and emotional adjustment (adapting to what cannot be changed). It may come as a challenge for people with DS to decipher what can be changed in their lives when so much of their physical and intellectual inadequacies cannot. However, if people with DS are able to cope with aspects of their lives that can be changed, such as improved social experiences and/or relationships, then they are able to feel a sense of control over the aspects that cannot be changed.

Effective coping mechanisms that both improve the ability to manage stressors and are tied to lesser distress and better well-being include optimism, psychological control or mastery, positive self-esteem, and social support (Taylor & Stanton, 2007). While optimism, psychological control or mastery, and positive self-esteem provide benefits for overall wellness, these strategies may already be intrinsic to some individuals (Taylor & Stanton, 2007). Social support, on the other hand, must be acquired through relationships. Allen, Ciambrone, and Welch’s (2000) findings indicate that the number of opportunities for people to socialize outside of the home was not a significant predictor of mood; however, they suggest that individuals may be engaging in social activities to varying degrees without leaving their homes. This could involve a scenario where people with disabilities may be getting their socialization needs met even though they appear to be somewhat detached from the larger community (Allen et al., 2000).

The communal support that people pursue is a type of coping referred to as social support. Social support is defined by behaviors that communicate to an individual that he/she is valued and cared for by others (Barnes & Duck, 1994). According to Miller and Kaiser
(2001), supportive others provide a safe environment for expressing stressors that may arise because of stigma. Considering the stressors associated with being disabled, finding and utilizing social support, as well as finding other ways to cope, is essential in the life of persons with DS. Most people are eager to feel a sense of belongingness, especially when they encounter stressful experiences. In regards to people with DS, when individuals know they can depend on others that value them as human beings, they are better able to cope with short-term and long-term challenges and anxieties that are associated with their disabilities. However, self-talk may prohibit social support from others when self-talk exists in public spaces, thus people with DS must attain a sense of perceived social support whether the support is from “real” or “imaginary” companions. Yang (2006) found that perceived social support mediates the detrimental effects that are associated with depressive symptoms. Therefore, subjective support (how one perceives his or her support network) is a powerful dimension of social support.

When individuals feel like they have a network to rely on, they are more likely to feel like they have the support they need in order to endure stressful situations. In accordance with Yang (2006), Allen, Ciambrone, and Welch (2000) also state that the perceived reliance of one’s social support may be critical for people with long-term disabilities having little to no chance of improvement. Thus, if an individual with DS perceives his or her social support network as reliable and easily accessible, there may be benefits to overall well-being. According to Kawachi and Berkman (2001), regardless if an individual has a disability or not, having strong social ties can increase the health of that individual, particularly when he or she is experiencing a stressful period in their lifetime. People with DS are socially stigmatized and tend to lack the communication competence to gain the social support
needed that most individuals experience. However, people with DS have been known to self-talk with celebrities as a way to gain support and control their interactions (Patti et al., 2009).

**Parasocial Relationships**

The subject of parasocial relationships (PSRs) has been widely studied and covers a magnitude of areas and topics within the study of entertainment. Through the concept of parasocial relationships, we may understand possible coping and social support benefits of parasocial relationships for people with DS. Parasocial relationship research explains how viewers relate to media characters. The creators of the term “parasocial interactions”, Horton and Wohl (1956), suggest that viewers of media form a sort of relationship with a media character over time, which increases the importance of that character to a viewer’s social life. Media characters can be identified as any real person or popular fictional character to whom media consumers react (Bocarnea & Brown, 2007). These characters can include television and movie characters, musicians, cartoon characters, newscasters, and television personalities. While some individuals may seek out interactions for pure enjoyment purposes and to encounter unaccompanied face-to-face simulations at home, individuals who do not display skills for adequate communication competence may be motivated to engage in parasocial interactions to compensate for their lack of rewarding relationships and to enjoy vicarious interactions to experience the enjoyment of normal social life (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Horton & Strauss, 1957).

Previous research indicates that parasocial interactions were thought of as enduring relationships between viewer’s and the media characters (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). However, according to Haartman and Goldhoorn (2011), viewers use parasocial interactions as a user experience to engage in certain activities to bring the illusionary experience to life.
Furthermore, parasocial interactions are considered more of an immediate response or experience to engage in a reciprocal social encounter with a media character (Haartman & Goldhoorn, 2011). In addition, Haartman and Goldhoorn (2011) also explicate that the greater perceived attractiveness of the media character and increased exposure over time leads to more intense parasocial experiences, heightened commitment to social norms in the exposure situation, and greater enjoyment of the exposure interactions. If an individual is struggling to make social connections outside of the home, they may try to fulfill these relationship needs through illusionary interactions. Hence, the individual may be more motivated to commit to daily media interactions that could precipitate a reliable relationship.

In order to commit to a media character, people evaluate what they watch or listen to depending on the desirability of the media character presented, and their engagement with that character (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schram, 2006). The subordinate processes associated with parasocial interactions help define the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral phenomena that occurs in viewers as a response to or directed toward their intended character. In the interest of this study, the subordinate processes explicated by Klimmt et al., (2006) include construction of relationships between character and self, mood contagion, and verbal utterances which will be highlighted and explained. These processes will be explained in more detail next.

**Subordinate Processes of Parasocial Interactions**

**Construction of relations between character and self.** Over time, viewers begin to understand the character’s personality and how that character portrayed in television or films relates to themselves. This cognitive response to a media character deals with the viewer’s reflection about a character compared to the viewer’s self. People tend to look for similarities
between themselves and the people on screen. This allows for identification to take place through affiliation. Identification with a media character allows viewers to establish a stronger parasocial relationship and creates a sense of connection to the viewer. According to Cohen (2001), identification is “a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them” (p. 254). If people develop identification with a media character, they are more likely to connect and feel as if whatever happens to that media character is also happening to them.

**Mood contagion.** As defined by Klimmt et al. (2006), mood contagion is the automatic and unintended transfer of mood from one person to another. Watching or listening to an admired character express a certain emotion often will trigger that same emotion within the observer. However, cognitive dispositions may intervene in the contagion process, and the viewer may override the spontaneous emotion in order to preserve their good feelings toward their intended character. These reactions to the stimuli are congruent to what a response toward a real person or friend would be similar to.

**Verbal utterances.** Comments, recommendations, expressions of understanding or indifference, and statements of agreement or dissent are some of the many verbal responses to media characters (Klimmt et al., 2006). Verbal actions or utterances can range from making comments to having full conversations with the character out loud. The frequency of verbal responses is higher in people with high-level parasocial associations that viewers deem relevant and important.

All of the subordinate processes associated with parasocial interactions listed above serve a foundation for how and why people establish parasocial relationships with media characters. In short, parasocial interactions often lead to parasocial relationships. According
to Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011), these relationships are one-sided, and share many commonalities with real-world relationships. While both parasocial interactions and parasocial relationships can be defined as separate concepts, some scholars suggest that the terms can be used interchangeably as continuous interpersonal involvement in situations of media exposure with media figures that includes different phenomena (Klimmt et al., 2006). For the purposes of this study, I will focus on parasocial relationships of people with DS.

Because parasocial relationships serve as an imitation of real-life relationships, these relationships may be desirable for people who tend to be shy or introverted. Vorderer and Knobloch (1996) found that parasocial relationships are more intense among individuals who are shy yet have a high need for social interaction. These parasocial relationships serve as a simulation that resembles real-life relationships and may provide an outlet for people who have problems in real-life social situations. Eyal and Dailey’s (2012) research with relational maintenance and mediated relationships found that friendships and parasocial relationships operate similarly, in that; they both facilitate commitment and closeness. The greater the relational commitment, the stronger the connection an individual feels towards another - in this case forming a parasocial relationship or friendship (Eyal & Dailey, 2012). Research speculates that lonely individuals may use parasocial relationships to compensate for a lack of real-world relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Horton & Strauss, 1957; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). People may become socially isolated because of a host of different reasons, but research has found that introverts are highly susceptible to loneliness and use parasocial relationships as a way to cope (Jarzyna, 2012).
Introversion and Attitudes Toward Celebrities

Practically all individuals have a need to belong and feel like they have someone they can go to in times of need. While many individuals do this by initiating interpersonal contact, others are not able to do so in order to satisfy their need for belonging. People who are introverts have a hard time establishing and maintaining relationships with others because they are less outgoing and tend to avoid social situations. According to Jarzyna (2012), individuals who talk less, and have fewer social skills find parasocial relationships particularly appealing as a way to satisfy belongingness needs because those relationships do not require interpersonal communication skills. While people may want to be outgoing and attend social activities that require interpersonal communication skills, some simply do not possess the ability. Often, to meet their interpersonal needs, these people use mass media (Rubin & Perse, 1987), and tend to prefer parasocial relationships.

Research completed by Jarzyna (2012) suggests that introverts gain more sense of acceptance through parasocial means when they feel socially threatened because interpersonal relationships pose more risk. Social threats pertain to feelings of rejection, uncertainty, and lack of acceptance within interpersonal interactions. Ashe and McCutcheon (2001) state, “Parasocial relationships with celebrities do not force shy and lonely people to experience the discomfort that typifies their interactions with ‘ordinary’ people” (p. 125). Because introversion and loneliness are often related constructs, research conducted by Ashe and McCutcheon (2001) suggest that these constructs are positively related to one’s attitude toward a favorite celebrity. People who are introverts seek out entertainment that allows them to form a connection with a media character to cope with loneliness.
Loneliness, Isolation, and Parasocial Relationships

Loneliness has been defined as “a sense of isolation that persists over time” (Perse & Rubin 1990, p.37). Loneliness can be caused by social introversion and/or low motivation for interpersonal relationships (Jarzyna, 2012). According to Perse and Rubin (1990), people react to loneliness by either initiating social interactions or finding productive ways to spend time alone. If not, helplessness, boredom, and depression can ensue. One of the productive ways people can spend time alone to prevent the feeling of loneliness is by forming parasocial relationships with a character who is perceived as real.

People are encouraged by the media to partake in parasocial relationships in television viewing to combat loneliness (Perse & Rubin, 1990), specifically with newscasters who are trying to seek and maintain loyal audiences (Rubin, et al., 1985). Research suggests that loneliness correlates with media reliance, and media reliance with parasocial relationships; however, there have been no significant findings that indicate that loneliness is associated to parasocial relationships. Wang, Fink, and Cai (2008) suggest that this may be due to the fact that different types of loneliness correlate differently with the amount of parasocial relationships one engages in. In addition, the effect of loneliness and parasocial relationships may be moderated by other variables, which requires further research into mental health. One example could be that the person with DS who had a chance to communicate in an interpersonal interaction might simply prefer to self-talk instead (Cuckle & Wilson, 2002). Research is needed to assess the degree to which individuals who have developmental challenges deal with loneliness and their need for interpersonal relationships through parasocial relationships. The prospective risk of loneliness experienced by people with DS highlights a need to further examine the media parasocial relationships that occur in
people with DS syndrome through self-talk.

To date, there has been sparse research on how people with DS form relationships with media characters and its potential impact on people with DS. Because people with DS are dependent on mediated group gatherings (gatherings reliant on parent/caregiver facilitation), the present study seeks to examine how people with DS use parasocial relationships to cope with loneliness and isolation and the use of self-talk. Whether parasocial relationships have a positive or negative effect on overall well-being will also be explored. Based on the previous literature, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: Do people with Down syndrome use self-talk to have parasocial relationships with media characters?

RQ2: Do people with Down syndrome use parasocial relationships with media characters as a coping mechanism?

RQ3: How do these parasocial relationships with media characters affect their well-being?

These research questions will be answered with a qualitative assessment in order to fully understand the communicative processes and interactions associated with media consumption practices.

**Method**

This study seeks to expand on past parasocial relationship literature by taking a qualitative approach to examine the relationship with people with DS and media characters. Parasocial research typically has employed quantitative approaches via questionnaires and scales (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Bocarnea, & Brown, 2007); however, this study uses a qualitative approach to explore questions of parasocial relationships in an under-researched
population such as people with disabilities. Many scholars have taken a qualitative approach to get more in-depth answers regarding parasocial relationships. For example Jennings (2014) developed an in depth interview protocol that addressed parasocial relationships in order to examine tween girls and their relationship with media characters. In another qualitative study, Valero (2014) examined parasocial relationships and sports figures using comprehensive interviews in order to allow the individuals to go into depth about their favorite media character while feeling comfortable enough to share such private information. Interviews with open-ended questions, instead of focus groups, allowed Valero to dive into the development and maintenance of each parasocial relationship she was examining. Following Valero’s work, this study formats participant profiles, which gave a detailed background of who the participants were and which media characters they enjoy. In accordance with Valero’s study, interviews allowed for more in-depth responses on who and why people with DS were talking to media characters.

Each interview session was conducted with both the caregiver and their family member with DS. Regardless of the relationship with the person with DS, all participants without DS are addressed as caregivers. For this study, caregivers included any individual who spent time with or looked after the person with DS in the same household for an extended period of time. Individual interviews with the caregiver were conducted first in order to understand if their family member with DS may have a parasocial relationship and to gain insight on what media character they may have a parasocial relationship with. After the caregiver interview was conducted, the family member with DS was interviewed with the caregiver close by in order for the family member with DS to not only feel comfortable
talking about personal instances, but also to act as an interpreter if the child had a difficult time using expressive language.

**Participants**

After receiving permission form the Institutional Review Board at the University of Cincinnati, participants were recruited from the Down Syndrome Association of Greater Cincinnati and the surrounding counties through disability program coordinators located in the Cincinnati regional area. A total of nine pairs of participants took part in the in-depth interviews (N=18). The participants with DS ages ranged from 11 to 31 years. Of the participants with DS, five males and five females participated in the interviews. All but two interviews with the caregivers was with a female. Although this sample size cannot account for all people with DS, interviews were conducted until a point of saturation in interview responses was reached. Children and adults with DS, as well as, parents and caregivers of people with DS served as the target population. People with DS were able to provide valuable insight about whom they talked to and what they talked about, while the caregivers were able to provide their own perceptions and evaluations to provide further insight to their son’s, daughter’s, brother’s etc. self-talk behavior. Pseudonyms were given to all participants in order to protect their identities.

**Participant profiles.**

**Caregivers.**

Paula

Paula is a 54-year-old Caucasian female. She is the mother of Samantha who has lived with her for 31 years. She spends time with or looks after Samantha in the morning before she goes to work and after when she comes home. When initially asked what her daughter’s favorite media characters were she said John Travolta, Robin Williams, and Andy Dalton.
Sandra

Sandra is a 54-year-old Caucasian female who is the mother of Kelly. She has been the caregiver of Kelly for 28 years. She spends around 13 hours a day spending time with or looking after Kelly. When asked who Kelly’s favorite media characters were she states that her favorites are Barbie and Elsa from Frozen.

Carl

Carl is a 66-year-old Caucasian male. He has lived with his daughter Allison for 30 years and spends around eight hours a day with her. He states that his daughter’s favorite media characters included Justin Bieber and all of the Disney princesses.

Deborah

Deborah is a 41-year-old Caucasian female who is the mother of Tyler. Her son Tyler has been in her household for 21 years, and spends around eight to ten hours a day with him. When asked, her son’s favorite media characters included Darryl from Walking Dead, SpongeBob, and professional wrestlers.

Jane

Jane is a 52-year-old Caucasian female and mother of Megan. She spends around two to five hours with Megan depending on the day. When asked she states that her daughter’s favorite media characters are Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson, and shark television shows.

Andrew

Andrew is a 23-year-old Caucasian male and brother of Peter. He has lived with his brother for 16 years and when they lived in the same household they spent around three hours together. When asked, he states that his brother’s favorite media characters include Harry Potter, Scooby Doo, and Willy Wonka.

Courtney

Courtney is a 29-year-old Caucasian female and sister of Matthew. She lived with Matthew for 22 years and spent around six hours a day with her brother. She states that her brother’s favorite media characters include, Kim Possible, Scooby Doo, the Jonas Brothers, and Big Time Rush.

Lisa

Lisa is a 56-year-old Caucasian female and the mother of Lucas. She has lived in the same household as Lucas for 11 years and spends around 18 hours a day with him.
When asked who her son’s favorite media characters were she states that he likes all of the characters from SpongeBob SquarePants.

Sharon

Sharon is a 65-year-old Caucasian female and the mother of Miranda. She has lived in the same household with Miranda for 25 years and spends the majority of the day with her, however she did state that Miranda enjoys spending most of her time in her room watching Fireman Sam.

_Participants with Down syndrome._

Samantha

Samantha (daughter of Paula) is a 31-year-old Caucasian female. When asked who her favorite media characters were she included Lou Ferrigno, John Travolta, Patrick Swayze, Robin Williams, and Elvis.

Kelly

Kelly (daughter of Sandra) is a 29-year-old Caucasian female. Elsa from Frozen, Little Mermaid, Barbie, SpongeBob, and Snow White are her favorite media characters.

Allison

Allison (daughter of Carl) is a 30-year-old Caucasian female. Her favorite media characters include all of the Disney princesses.

Tyler

Tyler (son of Deborah) is a 21-year-old Caucasian male. His favorite media characters include John Cena and Randy Orton, who are professional wrestlers, and Meryl Dixon and Rick Grimes, who are characters on the Walking Dead.

Megan

Megan (daughter of Jane) is a 25-year-old Caucasian female. Her favorite media characters include Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson, Nelly, Black Eyed Peas, and Austin Powers. She also enjoys shark movies and TV shows, and also likes R&B music.
Peter

Peter (brother of Andrew) is a 19-year-old Caucasian male. He states that his favorite media characters are Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, who are both from the Harry Potter movie series.

Matthew

Matthew (younger brother of Courtney) is 24-year-old Caucasian male. He states that his favorite media characters include Kim Possible and Big Time Rush.

Lucas

Lucas (son of Lisa) is an 11-year-old Caucasian male. His favorite media character is SpongeBob SquarePants, an animated children’s television show on Nickelodeon.

Miranda

Miranda (daughter of Sharon) is a 25-year-old Caucasian female, and her favorite media character is Fireman Sam, the star of a Welsh-British-American animated children's television series.

Procedure

Interviews with caregivers. (see Appendix A1). Nine pairs of participants (caregiver and family member) participated in a dyadic interview session. Questions for caregivers were derived from a self-talk survey to examine self-talk within individuals’ children with DS (Patti et al., 2009). The sessions ranged from 15-30 minutes and were audio recorded to allow for transcriptions to be coded. During each session, it was stressed that the research conducted is to benefit the DS community.

After a consent form was signed, the caregivers were asked about demographic information such as age, gender, and their relationship to the person with Down syndrome. The discussion facilitation was centered around the following areas (see Appendix A1) Self-Talk and Presence (e.g., Does your family member participate in self-talk, if so, how often?)

2) To whom is self-talk directed? (e.g., Who does your family member speak to during self-
talk?) 3) Frequency of Celebrity Self-Talk (e.g., If it is someone famous, how frequently does he/she talk to him/her?) 4) Loneliness and Isolation (e.g., Does your family member experience loneliness at home or in public settings? 5) Effects of Interactions (e.g., Does this interaction/relationship have a positive or negative affect on the person with DS? (Why or why not?)

These questions were intended to gain insight into the content and quality of the relationships, and if these relationships can be considered parasocial relationships. It also generated valuable information about the effects parasocial relationships have on the persons with DS as perceived by their caregivers.

**Interviews with people with Down syndrome** (see Appendix A2). These participants were the family members with DS of the caregiver interviewed in the first part of the interview portion of the study. First, a consent form was acquired from the caregiver of the person with DS and then the people with DS signed an assent form. Next, interviews with people with DS were conducted to understand if they have a parasocial relationship, why they have one with a particular person, and if it helps them cope with loneliness (see Appendix A2). Questions were derived from a child interview protocol that examined the influence of media characters on children (Jennings, 2014). Because people with DS vary in degrees of mental abilities, some of the participants were able to understand the questions and express themselves and gave a clear distinction about their PSRs, while others had a difficult time with critical thinking and sometimes started utilizing word association.

**Interview Analysis**

Once all of the interviews were transcribed and coded, a thematic analysis was applied to the raw data. According to Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2011), the primary goal
of a thematic analysis is to describe and understand how people feel, think, and behave in certain contexts particularly relevant to the research questions posed. Guest et al. also state that thematic analysis focuses on identifying and describing both the explicit and implicit ideas described within the data. This type of analysis makes the researcher dive into the transcriptions of the interviews to look for patterns and codes that are consistent throughout, also known as themes.

For this study, once themes started to emerge, codes were developed to identify those themes and applied to the raw data that yielded consistent ideas and expressions. Transcriptions were read and coded until the researcher observed replicated and redundant comments across the interviews, which Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to as 'saturation'. This research aimed to collect enough qualitative data to illuminate whether parasocial relationships were present, and whether these relationships were judged to have a positive or negative effect on the overall well-being of these people with DS. Furthermore, this study was directed to explore if the people with DS use parasocial relationships as a coping strategy to deal with isolation or loneliness that they might experience. Generally speaking, grounded theory is a flexible research approach that allows the data to develop emerging theories from the analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This is an inductive approach that forces the researcher to constantly interact with the analysis in order to develop reoccurring themes and patterns. Using a thematic analysis, from a grounded theory approach allowed for consistent and coherent themes to emerge.

**Findings**

Five major themes emerged from the interviews. The first three themes are categorized as psychological processing of media, which included 1) identification, 2)
attachment, and 3) entertainment. The last two themes are categorized as character interaction-focused themes, 4) self-expression and 5) interpersonal development. Each theme describes the communicative practices employed when interactions with a favorite media character transpired.

Psychological Processing

Identification. Identification requires audience members to imagine themselves in the character’s shoes (Cohen, 2001). In the terms of parasocial relationships, audience members must be able to identify or connect with their favorite media character. Shen (2009) states, “identifying and sharing similar or even identical features is required to construct identification” (p. 6). Many of the participants expressed a sense of likeness and in some cases wished to look like his or her favorite media character.

When the participants with DS were asked “Would you consider yourself to be like (media character)?”, or if they liked the same things as their favorite character, all responded in the affirmative; however, most had a hard time elaborating and word association was utilized when they could not configure a complete thought that would express how they felt. They used phrases like “Yes, because I want to swim” (referring to Little Mermaid), or “Yea because I like dancing”, and “I like Robin Williams because he is funny and goofy [like me]”. Another child was so invested in his favorite media character that he had his senior pictures taken to look just like the Harry Potter movie poster. Another parent noted that her daughter had pajamas made into the same uniform as her favorite media character (Fireman Sam) so that she could look like him while she watched that media character on screen.

I made her (Miranda) a pair of pajamas that looks like his uniform (Fireman Sam) …so that’s what she wears, black and white everyday because he wears black and white. (Sharon)
Each of these responses exemplifies identification conceptually which is further understood through the process of perceived similarity and wishful identification. The following describes participant responses that specifically aligned with these two aspects of identification.

**Perceived similarity.** Perceived similarity can be interpreted on a multifaceted level. Cohen (2001) explains that perceived similarity is not solely based upon demographic similarities but also similar attributes. Cohen (2001) states, “iconic representations (i.e., animated characters) often elicit feelings of similarity by suggesting similarity of attributes (e.g., goofy or scared) or similarity of situation (being ridiculed like Dumbo or scared and dependent like Bambi)” (p. 259). According to Feilitzen and Linne (1975) the probability of identification increases with the amount of perceived similarity between a person and a favorite media character. In the instance of similarity of situation, a few of the participants revealed that likeness as well as empathy might have fueled their identification toward a media character.

When asked if a participant with DS had anything else to say about a media character, a sense of empathy was illustrated. Samantha shared her admiration for her favorite media character’s courage:

Samantha: I think Lou Ferrigno is a really nice guy, because all the kids want to pick on him so he won’t be stronger.
Interviewer: So you like Lou Ferrigno because people have picked on him and he’s stronger. Why do they pick on him?
Samantha: Because he’s deaf.
Interviewer: Oh, he’s deaf, so that’s why they pick on him. And you don’t like that.
Samantha: No.
Interviewer: Right. And so you get happy when he stands up and fights back.
Samantha: Yeah.
In this example, Samantha may understand how Lou Ferrigno feels because of a similar shortcoming that she experiences as a person with DS, and it also illustrates that she may identify with this character because they are in similar situations. This participant empathized and related to the disability that sets them apart from their typical peers for which they are sometimes ridiculed. This demonstrates an intrinsic awareness for when people are going through challenging situations associated with a disability. Another parent of a person with DS also brought up that her daughter not only experienced empathy, but also realized that she liked the media character so much because they possessed similar values and feelings:

Interviewer: Is there anything else you’d like to say about the media character? Sharon: He’s always out to help people and she also has that trait (that she likes to help people) and she senses when people are in need and so does Fireman Sam.

These participants not only display the ability to share emotions with their favorite media character, but they also feel that they understand the feelings of that media character and the media character may also understand their feelings as well (Cohen, 2003). Many people with DS may not be able to utilize expressive language, and may rely on perceived empathy of their favorite media character in order to feel as if they have someone that understands them. If people with DS are able to feel as if the media characters can understand their feelings and thoughts, PSRs may foster the characteristics of being in a real-life, reciprocating relationship. While identification and parasocial are separate concepts, it is important to note that identification can precipitate a PSR in terms of influencing motivation and behavior.

**Wishful identification.** For this study, an extension of identification, developed by Feilitzen and Linne (1975), called wishful identification, best explained the thematic
phenomena as characterized in the interviews. Wishful identification is a psychological response process where an individual attempts or wishes to become another person (Hoffner, 1996). Hoffner also adds that once invested in a media character, social and psychological influences, such as appearance, attitude, and values may change in order to act like or be like that media character. According to Feilitzen and Linne (1975), wishful identification occurs when “an individual consciously or unconsciously recognizes him/herself in, or wishes to be, another individual so that he/she becomes involved in that individual and vicariously participate in his/her activities, feelings, and thoughts” (p. 52). The first research question explored if people with DS use self-talk to have parasocial relationships with media characters.

Many caregivers noted instances of role-play while watching a television show, a movie, or while dancing or listening to music. Many of the caregivers noted that self-talk was present during their family member with DS’s role-play. These individuals either thought they were the character or they wished to make that milieu a temporary reality. In the instances of believing they were a character, Sandra, the mother of Kelly, states:

When she (Kelly) sings, she thinks she’s Elsa…I’ve noticed that if there are specific things that Elsa would say within the movie, she'd parrot that and add it to her situation. I’ve not ever watched Frozen, but with Shrek, there were a couple of ‘Shrekisms’ that she would manage to include into her own dialogue with me or her brothers. (Sandra)

Also, Sandra expresses that her daughter Kelly is also fond of another media character, and would play out scenarios that the media character would have to perform. She stated:

Kelly used to call herself Hannah Montana. She used to say I can’t tell anybody my secret. Yeah, so she had a very long relationship with Miley Cyrus…She had every single CD from Hannah Montana, she had the entire Hannah Montana set, yeah Miley Cyrus was actually very, very big. (Sandra)
One participant with DS named Megan stated that she liked to role-play and act. She referenced a “we”, however, she did not indicate if it was with her media character or a real person:

Megan: I like to role-play in things and acting and shows
Interviewer: Can you give me any examples of a show you’ve role-played or acted in?
Megan: I usually have a band and stuff, cause we like hosting and stuff, singing and dancing that kind of stuff

Some participants referenced the word “role-play” directly during the interview, while others implied that their family member with DS was engaging in role-play. One parent of a participant with DS who is 31 years old, shared that:

I mean she’s (Samantha) role playing…She (Samantha) knows they’re not actually in the room with her, but she’s role playing acting like she is part of the movie or the sitcom or the situation that she enjoys watching and is acting out. Like if it’s Grease with John Travolta and a dance musical scene or, it’s just acting out parts of the movie or, the things about it that she likes the most. (Paula)

A sister of a brother with DS, who is 25 years old (Matthew), describes how her brother takes on the role of a suitor for one of his favorite media characters, Kim Possible. She stated:

More role-play, but not speaking for the other characters more just his role it seemed like. Kim Possible he wanted to find at Disney world when we visited because he wanted her to be his girl friend, he wanted to ask her out. (Courtney)

Some participants referenced role-play indirectly when asked if their child wished to interact with the character(s). Jane says of her 25-year-old daughter (Megan):

You know whenever she sees Michael Jackson or a show or hears his music she’s excited and happy. Same thing with sharks, same thing with you know like anybody that's dancing and singing and performing she kind of immerses herself into that. Like I think she puts herself in that place. (Jane)
Lisa, mother of 11-year-old Lucas, explains that her son with DS will act out what his favorite media characters is doing as if he is in the show.

(Referring to SpongeBob SquarePants) Maybe they’re in the restaurant and they’re flipping the Crabby Patties and he’ll pretend that he’s flipping the crabby patties. (Lisa)

These examples address not only the identification aspect of PSRs, but also the mood contagion and verbal utterances. These participants completely immerse themselves in the role that the media characters were performing, and act out the situations from television in order to feel as if they are a part of the media character’s life.

**Attachment.** Another major theme that appeared in the data was a sense of attachment to one or more media characters. Seven out of the nine caregivers considered their family members’ media character as a friend, and 10 out of 10 participants with DS confirmed that they considered their favorite media character to be a friend. In one instance the participant explained that they would be best friends.

Interviewer: All right, so do you think of Robin Williams as a friend? Like if he was here right now would you consider Robin Williams as one of your friends? Samantha: Yeah. He would be my best friend.
Interviewer: He would be your best friend? Okay, so let’s say Robin Williams is here with you what kinds of things would you guys do? Samantha: Be goofy, and have fun.
Interviewer: Have fun together? Okay. So let’s say you were in your room and no one was around, would you ever pretend or do you ever pretend Robin Williams is there talking with you, watching TV with you, or listening to music with you? Samantha: Yeah, I think he’s like an angel

This dialogue reveals not only a sense of attachment to a character, but it also shows that this participant has the cognitive ability to comprehend that Robin Williams could not be her real-life friend because he is deceased. One parent was adamant that her 29-year-old daughter considered her favorite media character as a friend:

Interviewer: Does Kelly think of Elsa or these Barbie’s as a friend?
Sandra: Yes
Interviewer: What makes you think that they’re friends?
Sandra: Well first of all, I’ve seen it first hand. I’ve seen her interaction first hand and she also refers to her Barbie’s all the time, about like she’ll come up to me and she’ll say one of her Barbies …Emma maybe… and she’ll tell me what her Barbie would do. You know…and usually it parallels something in her life like about four years ago my niece had a baby and her name was Harper, and she told me not long after that that one of her Barbie’s had just gotten a niece and her name was Heather. You know so, I mean it was very parallel, so that’s why I feel like they’re her friends because she does speak about them during the course of our interaction.

If these participants viewed their favorite media character as a friend, it is safe to assume that an attachment to that character would develop. Not only did many of the caregivers of family members with DS indicate that they believed there was a friendship with their media character, but many alluded to the fact that the media character was an integral part of the child’s day.

There was an overwhelming amount of responses that indicated that their child with DS was almost never without an interaction with their favorite media character, and if they were it was not for a long period of time. When asked “If you go places like the store or school do you like to pretend (media character) is with you?” A majority said yes. Also, many of the caregivers and participants with DS indicated that they experienced or would experience emotional distress if they were to lose their relationship with their favorite media character. Sandra, mother of Kelly, expressed that her daughter is hardly ever without her favorite media characters:

Interviewer: Does Kelly ever seem to miss Barbie dolls or Frozen when she hasn’t seen them recently?
Sandra: She’s never without them. Even when she goes to somebody’s house to spend the night, she’ll take two or three of her friends (referring to the dolls) with her.
Another mother said she had to go the extra mile in order to find her daughter memorabilia for her favorite media character because it was a television show based in Great Britain. The show also switched from a real actor portraying the character to a cartoon, which she said that her daughter Miranda was upset about:

Interviewer: Besides just watching them on screen, is there any memorabilia like CDs, posters, t-shirts…
Sharon: No t-shirts. We found a stuffed character. But again it's the character it’s not the real person. But she takes him everywhere.

With attachment comes the possibility of emotional distress if a favorite media character disappears or passes away. Cole and Leets’ (1999) found that audience members who were most intensely involved in their parasocial relationship with a media character were also the most concerned about the break-up of that relationship. There were two instances in particular where the caregiver of the person with DS indicated that their child was very “upset” when the media character passed away in real life or on the television show:

Interviewer: Does Tyler think of Darryl or any of these other characters as friends?
Deborah: Yes
Interviewer: What makes you think that?
Deborah: He’ll tell you. Like when Shane died on the show (Walking Dead) he cried. He got really upset, or Laurie one of the moms that passed away on the show he talks about her still like “when is she gonna come back on”. He still looks for her all the time

Another mother of a child with DS expresses that her daughter was upset when her favorite media character, Michael Jackson, passed away:

Interviewer: Does Megan seem to miss Michael Jackson or these other characters when she hasn't seem them recently? Like if she goes a couple days without watching or listening to his music do you think she misses them?
Jane: Yeah
Interviewer: Has she ever told you that she misses them?
Jane: She was really upset when he died (Michael Jackson).
Sharon, the mother of Miranda, states that her daughter misses the character when she isn’t able to watch the show:

Interviewer: Does Miranda ever seem to miss the character if she hasn't seen the show recently or if she hasn’t seen her doll recently?
Sharon: Yes, like we just went to Disney World and we did not have time for her to do her daily things...and the day we came home that’s all she wanted to do and while we were on the way home in the plane it was “Sam mom, Sam” (referring to Fireman Sam).

Sandra, mother of 29-year-old Kelly, expresses that her daughter had a bit of separation anxiety when Hannah Montana was cancelled; however, she also states that Kelly was able to move on to another character to connect with:

Sandra: You know, she did seem to have a little separation anxiety from Miley when she moved off of Hannah Montana...
Interviewer: Okay.
Sandra: The good news was she relied on the video collection that she had, so that that helped get over that unexpected end. I don’t think she was ever expecting that Miley Cyrus was going to move off Hannah Montana.
Interviewer: Yeah, so when Hannah Montana was over, she kind of had that separation?
Sandra: Right, so and the other point I would like to make is that when that separation happened, she was able to move on to the next person and the next person right now is Elsa.

This indicated that while the participants with DS may suffer from some separation anxiety if the character disappears, they are able to move on to other media characters without too much distress. Another example demonstrates the fluidity of characters throughout a participant’s lifetime. Courtney, sister of 25-year-old Matthew, explains that her brother liked Kim Possible so much that she has seen every episode; however, he took an interest in musicians when the Kim Possible “phase” ended:

Interviewer: Does Matthew seem to miss these characters if he hasn't seen them recently? Like if he hasn’t watched Kim Possible for a week does he crave that interaction?
Courtney: He liked to watch it. He definitely liked to watch it. It was one of those shows you always turned on you saw every episode so you got tired of seeing
it. But it really wasn't a long phase so now he just really loves the music. Now he’s really more into the music, its not as much the characters its more he really loves watching the music videos and the dances and feeling like, I think he’s a little more connected with the bands now.

Also, a couple reactions of people with DS indicated that they had no intention of leaving their favorite media character behind and vice versa, once again representing a two-sided or reciprocating relationship. Sandra asks her daughter Kelly if she thought her favorite media character would ever leave her, and Kelly, a participant with DS, replies that she does not think her friend would ever leave her:

Sandra: What happens if Little Mermaid goes away, would she ever leave you?
Kelly: If she ever goes away, I’d be sad.
Interviewer: You’d be sad if she left?
Kelly: Yeah.
Sandra: Do you think she’ll ever go away and leave you?
Kelly: No.
Interviewer: So you think that she will always be there to turn to? Like to hang out with?
Kelly: Yeah

Another participant with DS revealed that she too thinks her favorite media characters are there to stay:

Interviewer: So, to end, do you think you’ll continue to talk to these people when you feel alone, or when you’re home alone, do you think you’ll continue to dance with these people and talk to these people and have fun with these people?
Samantha: Yeah.

Increased attachment to a media character strengthens the parasocial relationship, and also increases the likelihood of emotional distress if that media character were to disappear. It seemed that most of the participants made an emotional investment in these characters, and in return, expected those characters to remain with them for the duration of their lives.

**Entertainment.** Enjoyment is at the heart of entertainment. Uses and gratification theory suggests that there is an intrinsic motivation people possess to seek out media to fulfill
a certain desire or need (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). Specifically, individuals who have a hard time making friends and using expressive language may seek out entertainment that they can compare to real life situations. Nabi, Stitt, Halford, and Finnerty (2006) argue that the more likely media is perceived as real, the more cognitive and emotional effort will be invested in to viewing behaviors, thus allowing them to experience the gratification they wish to receive. Each individual will use media for his/her specific needs, however, in terms of enjoyment; happiness was clearly a gratification that these individuals received from watching or listening to their favorite media character. All 18 participants confirmed that these media characters were a source of enjoyment and/or happiness. Carl, father of 30-year-old Allison reveals that his daughter experiences pure enjoyment when she sings with her favorite media characters:

Interviewer: Like a time where you've heard her maybe talk to a television screen or talk while she’s reading her books with the Disney princesses?
Carl: or sing with them?
Interviewer: Or sings with Justin Bieber or the princesses
Carl: She does it all the time…the standard line when she was a kid was “do I have to pay for this entertainment?” but I get it all the time from her.
Interviewer: What makes you think that they are friends?
Carl: Just the enjoyment, the constant enjoyment that she gets out of it and uh the frustration I get when [“Carl: Allison you want to watch a movie tonight?” “Allison: “Yeah lets watch Disney princesses” “Carl: Which one?” “Allison: Oh I don't know”]

Another mother shares that her daughter is very happy when she is watching her favorite media character and sometimes even chooses to interact in her room alone rather than partake a family activity:

Interviewer: Do you believe that Samantha feels happy or content when she is interacting with these characters? Do you feel like she is more upbeat and more confident?
Paula: Oh, She’s very happy, she’s singing and dancing and she likes to watch her things. We’ll invite her down to watch movies and do things with us and sometimes she will sometimes she wont and if she’s not, it means she’s
particularly engaged in watching something and may afterwards kind of be acting things out and dancing and talking to you know role playing for Samantha it’s more like role playing

This parent expressed that her daughter enjoys watching these media characters and interacting with them so much that sometimes she chooses those mediated interactions instead of real life interactions. When asked if the person with DS seemed happy or content when he/she was interacting or watching his/her favorite media character, nine out of nine caregiver participants gave the answer “Yes”. Other uses for entertainment can include boredom avoidance and leisure activities. Because people with DS tend to be more isolated, they depend on themselves to alleviate instances of isolation to prevent feelings of loneliness. Paula expresses that her daughter, Samantha, uses interactions with her favorite media characters in order to evade boredom:

Interviewer: All right, does Samantha interact or talk with these characters when she is alone, do you think that she interacts with these characters when she is especially by herself or when she is lonely?
Paula: Sure, I think more so when she’s the time between when she gets home from work and we [my husband and I] get home from work… I think she watches movies, she likes to do art work and then at times she likes to listen to her music and kind of dance around and role play and, and sing and act out some of these movies and TV shows that she enjoys.

Interviewer: Okay. Does Sarah interact with these characters as far as self-talk or talking to them…or is she in role-playing when she feels like she is in an uncomfortable situation?
Paula: I think more of it is a boredom situation like she might be at dinner with a bunch of people maybe not her peers…It may be family…older family members and she’s having a good time and interacting with them but after when she kind of thinks that initial conversation and things wind down or she’s not finding the conversation interesting, she’ll kind of start engaging in some role playing and talk to her friends that are the movie stars and TV stars and things like that.

Interviewer: Okay, good. Do you feel like Sarah confides in any of these characters when she is alone or feels isolated? Do you feel like she expresses her feelings or her feelings of loneliness towards any of these people?
Paula: No, I don’t…I don’t believe she does. I think in a kind of a backwards sense they relieve that sense of isolation or loneliness that she’s not really telling them about, or recognizes that that’s how she fills her time that she might
have those feelings and it tends to make her happy and alleviate that down
time or alone time when she might be wanting to do other things.

Many caregivers of family members with DS noted that their child usually watches or
interacts in their own separate space and treat it as a daily routine and made time for
interactions:

Sandra: But I can tell you that it is an integral part of her day and she always makes
sure that her day includes some interaction with her favorite characters,
whether it be Barbie or Elsa. She plans it.
Interviewer: Makes time for it obviously.
Sandra: Oh my gosh yeah.

Jane reveals that her daughter Megan enjoys interacting with her favorite media
caracters when she spends time alone in her room:

Interviewer: Back to these role-playing notes… can you think of any other role-
playing situations that she has or how do you think she puts herself into these
caracters? Does she put herself into television characters does she put herself
kind of in everyday life situations?
Jane: She likes to role-play everyday life situations and I think when I think she’s
alone she likes to go spend time in her room and be alone she does a lot of
role-playing there.

Many of the caregivers of people with DS also mentioned that when they overheard
the child self-talk, the nature of the conversation was directed towards something that
mirrored a real life situation that they were going through. While these findings adhered to
the psychological processes of parasocial relationships, another category related to
communicative practices emerged from the interviews.

**Character Interactions**

**Self-Expression.** The first communicative practice that emerged from the interviews
involved self-expression, which is defined as the way in which people make others aware of
how things appear from their point of view, including beliefs, emotions, moods, and
experiences (Green, 2007). Green states that self-expression is a result of linking disparate
phenomenae such as tone of voice, posture, facial expressions, words, and forms of art, together as a pattern of behavior to cope with a felt need. Down syndrome can disinhibit expressive language that is important for interpersonal relationships and coping. Many people count on their expressive language to “vent” about everyday frustrations and troubles. As previously stated, people with DS tend to use self-talk as entertainment in addition to alleviating frustrations they may feel during the day (Carlesimo et al., 1997). While previous parasocial literature has addressed psychological expression through feeling similar to a character and imaginative play with the media (Conway & Rubin, 1991), this study includes self-expression suggesting that people may use parasocial relationships as a communicative practice (interaction-focused practice) to express how they feel to their media character if they are not receiving comfort from real life interpersonal relationships. From the in-depth interviews, participants with DS used media characters for self-expression not only to express what they were feeling towards a character, but also used the characters to work through real life situations they were experiencing.

One participant spoke about her brother using his favorite media character as a way to connect with the same life situation that she and his other brother were going through. Because it was not plausible to have a committed romantic relationship at that particular time in his life like his sister and brother, he used his favorite media character as a way to experience those same feelings and situations:

Courtney: No I think it was just a step in his life. It was just having to learn that reality, I think a lot of it had to do with that my brother and myself were both dating and he really wanted to connect to that and didn't know how and so I think he connected with a woman in his life which is a show that he watched a lot.

Interviewer: I think my sister does the same thing because she sees my twin sister and I through relationships and clings on to these male figures.
Courtney: Yea he wants to connect to that. And he knew mom and dad were married and Chris (husband) and I were getting married.

In this instance, Courtney’s brother used his relationship with Kim Possible as a way to connect with his other siblings. He wanted to be able to experience the same life situations they were experiencing in order to connect with them.

It is worth mentioning that three of the nine participants with DS had actual dolls of their favorite character(s) to interact with, but also used them as representations of themselves. One incident in particular revealed that Sandra’s daughter Kelly, who is 29 years old with DS, not only used these dolls to express her feelings, but she also used the doll to work out situations she was dealing with in her everyday life. Sandra reports that her daughter has at least 50 dolls and has given each one a unique name. She goes on to say:

She gives them their own names and, the other thing that she does is, she’ll sit there for hours and she’ll have two or three interact with each other and she’ll also… depending on the social situation she is expressing, sometimes she’ll change her voice for one of them to be mad or… (Sandra)

When asked if her daughter Kelly personally interacts with the characters, whether she does verbally or behaviorally, Sandra states:

Well, first of all with the Barbie dolls, she’ll talk to them and be their voice as well. So she’s done that all her life. With regard to Shrek, she used to talk to him when he wasn’t there. She would have Shrek dolls that she would sleep with and they would…she would talk to Shrek a lot. (Sandra)

As the conversation continued, Sandra was asked if Kelly uses the dolls to talk to each other rather than talking to them directly. She replied by stating that it depended on the situation, but that she does do both. She stated:

She does both. Depending on her situation and what she has to work out. I’ve heard her in the past, if she was mad at her friend, she would use the Barbie’s to express her anger to a Barbie that she would name that would have the same name as her friend. She would be very adamant…animated, mostly through her voice, she would be
upset, she would start crying, and as the dialogue progressed, she would end up hugging the doll… it was all the way through to resolution. (Sandra).

It is worth noting that her daughter Kelly used the dolls for an entire interaction until there was a feeling of resolution. Another example of self-expression is revealed through Deborah’s son Tyler when she talks about how he utilizes his action figures as a tool to express himself through what is going on in his life:

Interviewer: So, do you know what types of things he talks about when he’s talking? Have you ever heard like a conversation or his interactions?
Deborah: Yeah like what ever he did at school or what he’s going to have for dinner or if he’s mad he talks to those men about it (action figures).
Interviewer: So maybe something that happened that made him mad during the day?
Deborah: Yea he’ll talk to them about it.
Interviewer: Do you believe that Travis confides in these characters when he’s alone or feels isolated?
Deborah: Yes
Interviewer: Can you give an example?
Deborah: He tells them about his day or if he’s mad you can hear him talking to them.

Another example of self-expression is shown when Lisa talks about her son Lucas, a 11-year-old boy with DS, and how he uses his collection SpongeBob stuffed animals to express his feelings during the course of the day:

Lisa: Even if it’s not in front of a TV he takes the animals and has conversations with them
Interviewer: Okay so he has actual dolls?
Lisa: Yeah and that’s actually what he was in there doing right before you came. Interviewer: So he actually has dolls and they interact together, maybe him not speaking to them but he uses those as...
Lisa: Yeah he talks for them. Like he’ll hold Mr. Krabs or whatever and he’ll have Mr. Krabs talking to SpongeBob in his own… I don't totally always understand the kind of conversation he’s got going on but, yeah, he has them talking to each other.
Interviewer: Have you seen any of these conversations express his feelings during the day? Maybe a situation that has happened…?
Lisa: Yeah. Not that I can tell but sometimes you can tell, like he’ll throw one of them like he’s mad about something I see I can see different emotions coming out of him as he’s using them.
As the conversation continued Lisa reveals more tangible evidence that her son uses these dolls as a way to express himself:

Interviewer: So do you think it’s more he’s trying to pretend that he’s in the movie or do you think it’s more he’s trying to express himself?
Lisa: I would say it’s more of just trying to express himself.
Interviewer: So it might be a way for him to practice maybe interpersonal communication?
Lisa: Yeah. Like he’s not really obsessed with a particular show, you know he’s got to watch this particular show or something because he wants to feel like he’s in it, but I think just the general, that's how he expresses himself.

These are good examples of dolls being used as a representation of a child who may have a hard time expressing his/her feeling in social situations. Some participants with DS used the dolls to resolve instances of distress, and were able to use the dolls for expression and to work through a whole scenario resulting in a resolution so that any discomfort they may have felt was alleviated by the interaction. Some caregivers reported that their family member with DS self-talked to their favorite media characters under stressful situations. It appeared that they used these interactions as a way to cope with anxiety when they had no control over resolving a situation:

Interviewer: All right does Maggie interact or talk with Michael Jackson in uncomfortable social situations?
Jane: Um not well… sometimes if there’s a stressful interaction, like the family is talking or arguing over something like that I’ll see her do it then. Not necessarily in social situations, usually in a stressful situation.

Kelly’s mother Sandra reports that her daughter uses her interactions as a way to express herself in situations that she may not be able to resolve in real life, but instead uses the doll to represent her situation and feelings. She stated:

We’ve never experienced a problem (referring to self-talk). We’ve never had anyone…we’ve never had anyone view the self-talk that I’ve noticed. And frankly, I like her self-talk because I feel like she is engaged and she needs sometimes an outlet to express, you know, what she’s going through. And sometimes she uses her
Barbie’s as a means to test out different situations. So, you know, I’m not unhappy that she has this tension because I think it makes her feel more comfortable in general too. (Sandra)

Carl, the father of Allison a 30-year-old with DS, reports that his daughter will use the Disney princesses as an outlet in uncomfortable social situations:

Interviewer: Does Allison ever interact or talk with these Disney characters if she is in uncomfortable in social situations? As far as if she just feels uncomfortable maybe around certain people or places, can you think of a time or example of that?

Carl: When she gets nervous or uncomfortable, she will change the subject, and it’ll get back to Disney or the book that she’s reading or… she’s got a new line she’s using lately its uh “Dad I itch” where she’s got brand new (inaudible) and its finally come to me that you know what she’s doing? She’s taking the fact that I’m uncomfortable in this situation or uncomfortable with what we’re talking about or uh in this but she, her new way of putting it.

Interviewer: So maybe she reverts back the conversation to something she’s familiar with like these Disney characters?

Carl: Yes, or she has a feeling that what she’s gonna to say you’re going to get mad at her, even if you prefaces it with “this isn’t mad” or it will calm her down a little bit, but uh she’d much rather talk about it (Disney characters).

Once people with DS are able to express themselves to a character they form a sort of bond and reliability that they can come to this character in a time of distress. Correspondingly, even talking about the character may mitigate their discomfort in situations they do not have control over. If people with DS interpret these interactions with media characters as an interpersonal relationship where both care about one another, they may utilize the relationship for interpersonal development.

**Interpersonal development.** Another aspect of parasocial literature that has been understudied is the interpersonal developmental skills that can result in the formation of parasocial relationships. Interpersonal skills are essential to managing relationships and are vital for the development of human relationships (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2011). Interpersonal development refers to the descriptions, assertions, and denials through development,
presentation, and validation regarding an individual’s relationships to objects or others (Cushman & Florence, 1974). It is important for people to be able to not only develop their own sense of self, but also to express those concepts through interpersonal communication. Horton and Wohl's (1956) idea, that parasocial interaction is similar to the establishment of social relationships with others, can create an environment of learning for people who lack real-life interpersonal skills. Many people with DS lack the necessary skills to engage others in a conversation. If people have a difficult time initiating conversation or understanding conversation amongst typical peers, people with DS may revert back to what is familiar in order to engage in a meaningful conversation. For example:

Interviewer: Does Samantha talk about John Travolta or any of these other characters to you or to her friends on a regular basis?
Paula: Yes, I think she shares the fact that these are her favorite movie stars or TV stars or athletes and um does bring them up in conversation more so maybe with her friends, she does with adult friends also to a point. When she wants to initiate conversation about different things with them.

Another instance of engaging in familiar conversation was reported when Andrew spoke about his brother, Peter, a 19-year-old male with DS:

Interviewer: Does Peter interact or talk with or talk about Harry Potter or any of these other media characters in uncomfortable social situations?
Andrew: Yea but he’ll still try to talk to us, but he’ll just start talking about movies. Interviewer: Okay so he’ll talk about movies that he likes.
Andrew: Yeah
Interviewer: So kind of draws the conversation back to what he knows?
Andrew: Yeah

Other caregivers expressed that they believed these interactions were a way to practice their communication skills in imaginary play settings and then take those skills into real life social situations. When asked if she viewed her son’s self-talk as positive or negative, Lisa reveals that she believes it is positive because her son uses his favorite media character as a way to practice his speech skills and as a way to express himself:
I just think it's more speech...practicing his speech. I think it's a good thing because he's actually verbalizing and not just sitting in there looking at a computer or an iPad because he loves his iPad too. So, I’m really happy when he’s not obsessed with the iPad and he’s actually interacting with…. because I bought him a girl’s dollhouse to help him create imaginary play. (Lisa)

Sandra, mother of Miranda, states that her daughter uses her favorite media characters to write out the conversations that are happening in real-time on the show because she has a difficult time using expressive language:

Interviewer: Do you think Miranda thinks of Sam the Fireman as a friend?  
Sandra: Yes  
Interviewer: What makes you think that?  
Sandra: Um because he does that talking and she doesn’t have to talk much. She puts her computer on closed caption and then she writes out the movies

These instances indicate that these relationships with media characters act as a form of expression and learning. People with DS may find characters they can connect with in order to practice their communication skills while feeling connected to their favorite media character.

**Discussion**

This study explored parasocial relationships among people with DS and how this population utilizes their identification with media characters to cope and develop interpersonal skills. As made evident by the analysis, each relationship with a media character was unique in it’s own way by the forms of media they selected, the ways in which they interacted with the character, and how it affected their well-being. Although each person with DS and the caregivers experienced their relationship with their media character in a different way, each gave a detailed description on their thoughts of the media character and
several strong themes emerged from the in-depth interviews. Each theme is discussed in relation to previous scholarship and the research questions raised in this present study.

**Research Question 1: Self-Talk and Parasocial Relationships**

The analysis revealed that these people with DS used self-talk as a way to create and maintain parasocial relationships with their favorite media character. Through role-play, participants immersed themselves within the television show or character’s life. Some caregivers claimed that their son/daughter/sibling believed they were the actual characters while others believed they were using role-play to pretend that they were with the character either in the television show or in real life.

Turner (1993) suggests, parasocial relationships can be activated and promoted by the function of perceived similarity between audience members and media figures. Many of the participants in this study expressed their connections to their favorite media characters, which infers a parasocial relationship. All nine of the people with DS confirmed that they were in some way similar to their favorite media character. This suggests that the participants with DS were able to deepen their connection with the media character and invested time to establish a continuing relationship. Many of the participants felt as if they understood their favorite media character’s life, and felt it was their job to advocate for their favorite character if he/she was different in anyway or experienced the same hardships that they experience. Parasocial relationships have been associated with viewer’s increased awareness of perceived similarities and the media character’s emotions (Stacey, 2014). This study suggests that these people with DS not only understand their favorite media characters on many levels, but have a deep personal connection with them as well.
Another aspect of identification that was predominant in most people with DS was wishful identification. Many of the participants wanted to dress, act, and even be their favorite media character. Many of the participants immersed themselves in the television show and even in some cases the media character’s life in order to make their relationships as realistic as possible. Samantha, for example, not only watched or listened to all of her favorite media characters’ movies, television shows, and CDs, but she also got to know the characters in real life. She reported that she knew all about her favorite media characters’ families, problems in their lives, and their exact birthdays down to the year they were born. She wanted to immerse herself in the life of her favorite media character so she could identify and connect with them. Konijn, Bijvank, and Bushman (2007) completed a study on wishful identification and video games and found that participants were especially likely to identify with characters when the game felt realistic and the participant felt immersed in the game. These participants engaged themselves in the lives of their favorite media characters to make their relationships more realistic.

Attachment was another major theme that further exemplified the idea of parasocial relationships between these people with DS and media characters. All of the participants with DS said they thought of their favorite media character as a friend. Attachment and parasocial relationship studies suggest that parasocial relationships depend on the same processes that create a foundation for close real-life relationships (Cohen, 2004). The conditions to form attachment usually involve empathy and perceived similarity, which many of the participants expressed. This helps to lay the foundation of their attachment to these media characters.

People with DS in this study attached themselves to media characters in order to experience friendships they may not have access to in real life. With attachment, many
caregivers expressed that their son/daughter/sibling’s favorite media character was an integral part of their child’s life and even their family’s life. One mother of a son with DS stated that, “We’ve even had birthday parties and swim parties and … yeah SpongeBob is like part of our family”. Five of the nine children with DS and/or their caregiver verbalized their concern for their abandonment of their favorite character, and some of people with DS expressed that they experienced sadness when they found out their favorite media character passed away.

Enjoyment and happiness was a major outcome of these relationships with favorite media characters as evident by all caregivers stating that their family member with DS expressed happiness as a result of the relationship. Expressions of happiness included verbal interactions, repeating catch phrases of favorite characters, singing, laughing, smiling, and dancing when watching or interacting with their favorite media character. These parasocial relationships were also utilized for boredom avoidance and leisure activities. Many of the participants reported that interactions with media characters occurred in the privacy of their own room. This suggests that they like to keep these interactions mutually exclusive and to avoid any external interruptions.

**Research Question 2: Parasocial Relationships and Coping**

The interaction-focused theme of self-expression stresses the communication practices that are associated with parasocial relationships because of people with DS’s exposure and/or identification with their favorite media characters. The interviews revealed that these people with DS use media characters as a way to express themselves when they are not able to communicate with people without disabilities. These interactions help facilitate an environment where people with DS feel they can understand and be understood. Caregivers
of people with DS reported that their family member would use these interactions as an outlet to vent feelings or emotions they were experiencing, but could not necessarily express or resolve. Many caregivers reported their family member with DS using the media characters as their personal voice in order express anger, happiness, and feelings of resolution. These relationships are conducive for improving social confidence and coping with any deficiencies in their abilities to communicate.

**Research Question 3: Parasocial Relationships and Well Being**

Of the eighteen interviews collectively, it was overwhelmingly apparent that these media characters had a positive effect on the well-being of these people with DS. Out of the eighteen participants when asked if they thought the family members’ self-talk with a media character was positive or negative, none of the caregivers reported having any negative effects. One mother stated that when she first started noticing her daughter self-talk she was concerned that it might be a sign of mental illness. When I asked how she felt about it now, she stated that she has accepted it as a part of her daughter’s life, and that she believes she creates these relationships out of loneliness and wanting to have relationships and interactions. Many of these participants with DS used their favorite media character as a way to initiate and hold conversations with non-disabled people in order to feel connected to others that were different from them. Those who are less inclined to communicate interpersonally are more likely to hesitate to initiate conversations (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2011; Turner, 1993); however, these people with DS utilized these relationships from a conversational standpoint to use familiar topics as subject matter they are well versed in to initiate and increase their comfort level.
Some of the participants used relationships with media characters to practice their communication skills. Mares and Woodard (2005) found that television has the potential to foster positive social interactions, reduce aggression, and encourage viewers to be more tolerant and helpful. These people with DS used their favorite media characters on television as a learning tool or for them to replicate interpersonal skills they see performed by that media character. Caregivers reported that their son/daughter used their media character as a tool to help them practice and feel more comfortable communicating in social situations. Within the concept of identification, an audience member may imitate interpersonal communication skills performed by the media character in order to maintain a desired relationship with a media character (Cohen, 2001). As stated in the findings, one of the participants, Miranda, frequently uses the catch phrase “In Action” that her favorite character Fireman Sam says, and writes out all of the conversations during the program because she has a difficult time using expressive language. These people with DS may be imitating their favorite media character in order to identify with them while unknowingly and simultaneously practicing interpersonal communication skills. This suggests that a possible byproduct could be increased self-esteem, feeling more connected and fulfilled in real life relationships, and a reduction of loneliness.

**Implications of the Study**

Not only does this research add to understanding the uses of parasocial relationships for these people with DS, but it may also apply to people without disabilities. The findings of this study indicate that these people with DS used parasocial relationships as a means to improve communication skills and cope when they feel they are having feelings of isolation. Self-talk was utilized by the people with DS as a way to identify themselves with media
characters, form an attachment with media characters as a real-life friendship would, and also as a means to entertain themselves during periods of loneliness or boredom. Furthermore, self-talk with favorite media characters can assist with developmental skills to navigate social space, and to help connect with others. Media characters may act as an outlet for self-expression and may raise an individual’s self-esteem because they feel as if they have a “friend” to talk to. Interpersonal relationships are vital for the overall well-being of an individual, and the interpersonal development skills acquired through parasocial relationships could prove to be invaluable.

Much of the past parasocial literature examines only the aspect of a one-sided relationship and its effects on non-disabled people. This study expands on the previous literature by studying the effects of parasocial relationships among people with DS. This study also opens a new avenue to study the interpersonal skill development that may result because of parasocial relationships. Interpersonal skills practiced during parasocial relationships can be utilized in real life social situations. As a result, stigma associated with a disability can lessen as people with disabilities begin to initiate conversations confidently with non-disabled people. Future studies should utilize parasocial literature in order to study the interpersonal growth and stigma reduction that may occur because of the formation of these relationships.

This study also suggests that these people with DS used parasocial relationships, not because they are mentally inept, but because they have the intellectual awareness to use these relationships as a tool to cope and connect with others. Anyone who may be less inclined to initiate social interactions, because of low self-esteem that may result from a host ailments, may use parasocial relationships to practice interpersonal developmental skills at home and
then use them to gain real-life interpersonal relationships. People with DS, or non-disabled people for that matter, should not be discouraged from developing or maintaining these relationships unless it replaces real life social situations when available. Future research should explore the uses of parasocial relationships in-depth to better understand the utilization of relationships among all people with disabilities who may be susceptible to loneliness. It should also address the effects of these relationships in social situations, and if they impede relationships with others.

**Limitations of the Study**

Although the results contributed valuable insight to parasocial literature, there were a few limitations that have to be addressed. One limitation that could not be ignored was the lack of comprehension among the participants. While most of the questions were understood, some participants had difficulty with how to answer them. However, it should be noted that some were able to comprehend well, but were unable to express what they wanted to say. Future research should establish qualifying measures for comprehension. Critical thinking was another barrier for the participants as some used word association instead of critically thinking about the question asked. This indicates that they either were not able to critically think about they question or they were unable to express themselves within their answer. Future research should develop criteria to examine individuals’ ability to think critically. Also, these participants ranged from low functioning to very high functioning. Future research should indicate and test the functionality level of participants and develop appropriate research questions.

Although research was conducted to a point of saturation, the sample size was not optimal due to difficulty in recruiting caregivers. There was adequate access, however the
organizations had to serve as intermediaries because of confidentiality concerns. A study completed on a larger scale will yield more generalizable results. Another limitation was the caregivers’ understanding of their family members’ interactions. Many caregivers played a major role in their family member’s life, but because much of the self-talk was directed towards themselves, it was hard for the caregivers to understand to whom and what their family member was talking about. Future research could address this issue by having parents or caregivers observe their family member’s self-talk while looking for signs of a parasocial relationship.

**Conclusion**

Even with these limitations, the data yielded some interesting results. Findings indicated that participants use their interactions with media characters or celebrities to feel connected and/or to figure out how to connect with people in their actual environment. By gaining a deeper insight on the use of parasocial relationships in people with DS, steps may be taken in the future to help reduce loneliness or isolation in people with all disabilities. The present study is one of the first to explore parasocial relationships in more depth among persons with disabilities and to do so qualitatively. As communication scholars continue to investigate similar questions, we will hopefully help to develop current enjoyment theories and potentially think of ways to use media to assist in the personal and interpersonal development of people with disabilities.
References


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Appendix A1

Parent/Guardian Interview Protocol

Demographics/General Questions

1. Name
2. Age
3. What is your direct relationship with (name)?
4. How long has (name) lived with you in the same household?
5. How many hours a day would you say you spend with/look after your son or daughter?
6. Can you think of any TV character, musician, cartoon character, athlete, or actor that you would consider to be a favorite of (name)?

7. Can you think of a time when (name):
   a. Talks to (name of character) when (name of character) is portrayed on a screen or in music?
   b. Acts like (name of character) is interacting with him/her when viewing the character on a screen, or while listening to the character’s music?

8. Does (name) think of (name of character) as a friend?

9. Does (name) talk about (name of character) to you or his/her friends on a regular basis?

10. Does (name) have any movies, CDs, posters, books, games, toys, t-shirts or other things with (name of character) on it?
    a. What kinds of things does he/she have?

11. Does (name) interact/talk with (name of character) when he/she is alone?

12. Does (name) interact/talk with (name of character) in uncomfortable social situations?
    a. Can you provide any examples?

13. Do you believe that (name) confides in (name of character) when he/she is alone or feels isolated?

14. Do you believe that (name) seems happy or content when he/she is interacting with (name of character)?

15. Is there anything else you’d like to say about media character?
16. Are there any questions or concerns you have before continuing with the second part of the interview?

Appendix A2

Parent/Guardian-Child Interview Protocol

1. Who are some characters in the media – that is on TV, in movies, in video games, and on the computer, or a music artist – that you like now?
2. Let's talk about one of the characters from those TV shows (or movies or video games) that you really liked. Pick one you'd like to talk about. Why did you like that character?
   Would you consider (name of character) to be your favorite character for now?
3. OK, let’s talk about (name of character). Would you consider yourself to be just like (name of character)? Why or why not?
   a. Can you tell me a time when you and (name of character) seemed just like each other?
4. Do you think that you share some of the same characteristics as (name of character)? So for instance, Do you think you like the same things? Talk the same way? Look the same way? Feel the same way?
   a. Why or why not (each time)?
   b. Can you tell me a time when you and (name of character) shared the same characteristics?
5. Do you ever wish you could be more like (name of character)?
   a. Why or why not?
   b. If yes, can you tell me a time when you wished you were more like (name of character).
6. Is there anything interesting you can tell me about (name of character)?
   a. Do you know anything about (name the character) family, interest, and/or birthday?
7. Do you think of (name of character) as a friend?
   a. Why or why not?
8. When no one is around do you ever pretend that (name that character) is there talking with you, watching TV with you, or listening to music with you?
   a. Why do you think (name that character) is with you?
9. Do you ever pretend that you are apart of (name that character) movie, show, or life?
10. If you are by yourself, do you ever like to pretend that they are there to hang out with you?
11. If you go places (like the store, school, places with your friends) do you like to pretend that (name that character is with you)
12. Do you have movies, CDs, posters, books, games, toys, t-shirts or other things with (name of character) on it?
   a. What kinds of things did you have?
   b. Do your friends have things like this, too?
   c. Why do you (and your friends) have these things?
13. Do you think your parents like (name of character)? Why or why not?
14. Is there anything else you’d like to say about media characters and friendship?