

Tears on Screen: Melancholic Content and Impending Loneliness

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ABSTRACT

Melancholic content is often characterized by a portrayal of human emotion through somber imagery, introspective dialogue and settings which can potentially breed emotional distress, social withdrawal and reduced motivation in its viewers. Continuous exposure to melancholic content may normalize or reinforce negative emotions, making individuals more susceptible to viewing sadness as inevitable or even desirable emotional states. Drawing upon a review of literature spanning psychology and media studies we explored how consumption of melancholic media can exacerbate feelings of loneliness. To examine this, participants were exposed to a compilation of melancholic clips and their loneliness levels were measured. A Focus Group yielded an understanding of their emotional experiences and perceptions when engaging with such content. This study offers a comprehensive understanding of the ramifications associated with media consumption.

Keywords: *Melancholic Content, Media Consumption, Loneliness, Well-Being, Emotional Distress*

In this digital era characterized by an infinite barrage of information, there appears to exist a paradoxical undercurrent of depression, melancholy, and loneliness. Albeit the wide array of media, certain individuals find themselves increasingly isolated and disconnected from real world relationships. One way in which this manifest is through the portrayal of themes of loneliness, loss, nostalgia in the media which we are increasingly consuming. Television shows, movies and series often explore themes of heartbreak, hopelessness, and existential angst, presenting a view of how bleak the world can be. For individuals who are already experiencing symptoms of depression and distress this content serves as a catalyst, exacerbating their feelings of loneliness. Conjointly, melancholic content can also serve as a form of validation for individuals already experiencing loneliness. Characters or narratives that reflect their own feelings of isolation and a need for longing resonate well with these individuals, providing a sense of solace and understanding and helping them feel less alone in their experiences. However, this validation can without a doubt breed a cycle of negative emotions reinforcing feelings of loneliness and preventing individuals from seeking out opportunities of social connect and support.

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Melancholic content, for individuals grappling with depression, serves as a true bane, complicating the already daunting task of challenging their distorted beliefs. While some may seek solace or validation in such narratives, finding a form of catharsis in the shared experiences depicted, for others, exposure to melancholic content can prove to be a formidable obstacle on their path to recovery. This is particularly true as therapeutic interventions, designed to confront and reframe negative thought patterns, are rendered less effective in the face of continual reinforcement of despair and hopelessness through media consumption. Consequently, rather than aiding in the process of challenging negative thought patterns, exposure to melancholic content may inadvertently reinforce and entrench these patterns, hindering progress towards healing and recovery for individuals battling depression.

Loneliness can have devastating and profound effects on the mental health and well-being of an individual. Beyond simply feeling alone, loneliness encompasses a complex interplay of emotional, cognitive, and physiological factors that can significantly impact one's mental health (Park et al., 2020). At an emotional level, loneliness can manifest as feelings of sadness, emptiness, and longing for connection. These emotions can be deeply distressing and may lead to a sense of hopelessness or despair, particularly if the individual perceives their loneliness as inescapable or chronic. Over time, the emotional toll of loneliness can contribute to the development or deterioration of mental health conditions, as individuals struggle to cope with the overwhelming sense of isolation. Besides, loneliness can distort an individual's perception of themselves and their relationships with others. Individuals experiencing loneliness may perceive themselves as fundamentally unworthy of connection or friendship, leading to negative self-talk and self-isolation (Quadt et al., 2020). Similarly, they may interpret social interactions in a more negative light, attributing perceived rejection or indifference from others to their own inherent deficiencies. These cognitive distortions can perpetuate feelings of loneliness and contribute to a vicious cycle of negative thinking and social withdrawal. Physiologically, loneliness has been linked to a range of health issues, including increased stress levels, disrupted sleep patterns, and compromised immune function. Chronic loneliness has been shown to activate the body's stress response system, leading to elevated levels of stress hormones such as cortisol. Over time, this chronic stress response can take a toll on both physical and mental health, increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease, immune disorders, and mental health conditions (Quadt et al., 2020).

Hence in today's media landscape, where we are bombarded with an endless stream of content, understanding how specific aspects of media influence our thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors is crucial. One such aspect that warrants attention here is the concept of priming. Priming, often thought of in connection to memory and recall, suggests that information or stimuli encountered in media can have a significant impact on subsequent cognitive processes (Hoewe, 2020). The agenda-setting effect and priming are two interrelated phenomena in media psychology that shape the way individuals perceive and interpret information presented to them. Agenda setting refers to the media's ability to influence the public's perception of the importance of certain issues by deciding which topics to cover prominently. This can impact the public agenda by determining what individuals consider to be significant. Priming, on the other hand, operates on a more subconscious level, where exposure to certain media content (the prime) influences subsequent beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors related to topics or concepts associated with that content. Essentially, agenda setting establishes the topics deemed important, while priming influences how individuals think about and respond to those topics. These concepts work in tandem, as the media's agenda setting can create a context that primes individuals to focus on specific aspects of the

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issues presented, thereby shaping their perceptions and responses (Moy et al., 2019). This agenda-setting effect can heighten awareness and sensitivity toward loneliness and melancholy, prompting individuals to consider these emotions as significant societal concerns. Furthermore, priming comes into play as exposure to melancholic content primes individuals to focus on aspects related to loneliness and sadness. The repeated exposure to such content can activate associations in individuals' minds, influencing their subsequent perceptions and responses to feelings of melancholy and experiences of loneliness. Thus, the combined impact of agenda setting and priming in media content contributes to shaping societal attitudes and behaviors regarding melancholic content and loneliness.

Additionally, dual-process models offer a valuable framework for comprehending individuals' responses to melancholic content and depictions of loneliness in media. These models propose that cognitive processing comprises two distinct mechanisms: automatic and controlled. When individuals encounter melancholic content, automatic processing is activated, leading to effortless and involuntary reactions to the emotional cues presented. This automatic processing may manifest as immediate emotional responses or subconscious associations with personal experiences of loneliness or sadness. In contrast, controlled processing may be initiated when individuals consciously reflect on or analyze the melancholic content (Hoewe, 2020). Thus, the dual-process model elucidates how media representations of melancholy and loneliness elicit both spontaneous emotional reactions and deliberate cognitive responses, influencing individuals' perceptions and behaviors in multiple ways.

Priming, as extensively studied, is commonly viewed through the lens of memory and retrieval. This perspective suggests that when a prime is presented, information associated with it becomes accessible in memory. Moreover, for this connection to occur, the information linked to the prime must possess a sufficiently strong association. If such associated information is readily available in memory, it enhances the likelihood of the prime exerting influence on subsequent beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Thus, priming operates by activating related concepts stored in memory, thereby shaping individuals' cognitive processes and responses. Therefore, exposure to melancholic content in media may activate thoughts, emotions, or memories related to loneliness, amplifying feelings of sadness or triggering introspection about personal experiences of isolation. This process can shape individuals' perceptions of loneliness and influence their attitudes toward related topics, potentially affecting their behaviors and coping strategies in response to feelings of melancholy or social isolation.

Another factor to consider here is social anxiety, which is characterized by an intense fear of social situations and can significantly impede an individual's ability to engage in everyday interactions (Leichsenring & Leweke, 2017). The fear of judgment, embarrassment, or rejection often leads to avoidance behaviors, wherein individuals withdraw from social gatherings or conversations, seeking solace in solitude. In such a scenario, binge-watching serves as a refuge, offering a temporary reprieve from the pressures of social interaction. With a plethora of TV shows and movies readily available, individuals can immerse themselves in fictional worlds. However, this transient solution is least promising and can exacerbate feelings of loneliness in the long run. As individuals spend prolonged periods isolated in front of screens, they miss out on opportunities for genuine human connection (Starosta & Izydorzyc, 2020). Considering the fact that humans are social animals it is safe to say that absence of meaningful interactions can contribute to a deep sense of loneliness and alienation. Moreover, excessive screen time has been linked to feelings of disconnection

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and emotional emptiness, further perpetuating the cycle of loneliness. The allure of binge-watching lies in its ability to offer distraction and entertainment, effectively numbing the underlying anxiety and discomfort associated with social interaction. In the digital realm, individuals can curate their viewing experiences, selecting content that aligns with their interests and preferences. This sense of control can be empowering for those grappling with social anxiety, as it provides a semblance of agency in an otherwise unpredictable social landscape.

The content one chooses to consume during binge-watching sessions plays a crucial role in shaping their emotional experience. While some may opt for light-hearted comedies or action-packed thrillers, others are drawn to more melancholic fare—stories laden with themes of loneliness, heartbreak, and doom. There is a peculiar pull to the melancholic, perhaps because it reflects and validates one's own feelings of sadness and isolation. In a way, it provides a sense of camaraderie, reassuring them that they are not alone in their struggles. Yet, this indulgence in melancholic content can be a double-edged sword. While it may offer temporary solace by allowing individuals to connect with characters who share their emotional turmoil, it also reinforces and perpetuates feelings of sadness and despair (Sung et al., 2018). Instead of providing an escape from loneliness, it envelops viewers in a cycle of melancholy that is difficult to break free from. Moreover, the solitary nature of binge-watching further exacerbates feelings of isolation. As hours turn into days and days into weeks spent glued to a screen, the outside world fades into obscurity, and real-life connections begin to wither. Social interactions become increasingly daunting, leading individuals to retreat further into their digital cocoon, where the only company they need is that of fictional characters and scripted narratives. Loneliness, once a fleeting emotion, becomes a constant companion—a shadow that looms over every waking moment. Nevertheless, the seductive appeal of binge-watching can also foster avoidance behaviors, wherein individuals retreat further into isolation rather than confronting their fears. The temporary relief provided by binge-watching offers escapes at the expense of genuine growth and connection. Over time, this avoidance pattern reinforces feelings of inadequacy and reinforces the belief that social interaction is inherently threatening and loneliness follows.

Self-regulation can help break this cycle. Self-regulation refers to the ability to manage and control one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in order to achieve personal goals and adapt to different situations. It involves processes such as emotional regulation, impulse control, and decision-making (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Lack of self-regulation can contribute to loneliness, particularly through excessive viewing of melancholic content. When individuals lack self-regulation, they may struggle to manage their emotional responses to external stimuli. While viewing melancholic content, individuals may find themselves drawn to these narratives as a way to cope with their own emotions or to seek validation for their feelings of loneliness. Moreover, individuals with poor self-regulation may have difficulty controlling their impulses, leading to binge-watching behaviors. This can further perpetuate feelings of loneliness by isolating individuals from real-life social interactions.

Additionally, a lack of self-regulation can impair individuals' ability to make informed decisions about their media consumption habits. They may engage in binge-watching of melancholic content as a way to avoid addressing underlying issues or seeking help from others. This avoidance behavior can contribute to a vicious cycle of loneliness, as individuals become increasingly disconnected from sources of social support and meaningful engagement. Self-regulation plays a crucial role in mitigating loneliness,

particularly in the context of media consumption. By developing healthy coping mechanisms, regulating emotional responses, and making mindful choices about media consumption, individuals can better manage feelings of loneliness and foster meaningful connections with others.

METHODOLOGY

Hypothesis

Alternative Hypothesis

H_a: Increased exposure to melancholic content will lead to higher levels of loneliness among individuals.

Null Hypothesis

H₀: There is no significant relationship between increased exposure to melancholic content and levels of loneliness among individuals.

Procedure

The research employed a mixed-method approach to investigate the impact of melancholic content on loneliness levels. First, participants completed a pre-survey using the UCLA Loneliness Scale to establish their baseline scores of loneliness. This questionnaire is a validated instrument commonly used to measure subjective feelings of loneliness and social isolation. A week after completing the pre-survey, participants were exposed to melancholic content through a compilation of audio-visual clips that totalled to a duration of 7 minutes and was presented on a conveniently visible smart-board. This content was selected to evoke emotional responses associated with sadness and melancholy. Following exposure to melancholic content, participants completed the UCLA Loneliness Scale again to assess any changes in their feelings of loneliness. This post-survey aimed to measure the immediate impact of consuming melancholic media content on participants' perceived loneliness levels. Subsequently, participants engaged in focus group discussions to explore the facets of the type of media consumed and its relationship with loneliness. These discussions provided insights into how different types of media content may influence feelings of loneliness and emotional well-being.

Sample

The participants in this study were college students in the age group of 18 - 25 who reported regular engagement with various forms of media, including, but not limited to, films, television, and literature. Participants were recruited through random sampling and the inclusion criteria for participants were based on their age and their self-reported media consumption. The sample comprised individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to ensure a breadth of perspectives.

Measure

The primary measure used in this study to assess loneliness was the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996). This questionnaire consists of a series of 20 statements designed to evaluate feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Participants rated each statement on a Likert scale of 1 to 4 denoting frequency, where 1 signified never and 4 always, indicating the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the frequency of each statement. The scores obtained from the questionnaire provided quantitative data on participants' perceived loneliness levels, both before and after exposure to melancholic content. Additionally, qualitative data obtained from focus group discussions supplemented the quantitative findings, offering deeper insights into the subjective experiences and perceptions of participants regarding the

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relationship between media consumption and loneliness (The discussion guide is attached in the appendix). These discussions were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

A paired samples t-test was performed to evaluate whether there was difference in the levels of loneliness before and after the treatment. The results indicated that the participant's level of loneliness increased from pre-program ($M = 44.32$, $SD = 11.447$) to post-program ($M = 48.02$, $SD = 12.446$; $t = -10.334$, $p < .001$). The effect size of the study, which was demonstrated through Cohen's $d = -1.311$, suggests that there is a large effect size. The null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected and the alternate hypothesis (H_A); i.e. increased exposure to melancholic content is associated with higher levels of loneliness among individuals was retained. Additionally, some themes emerged from the focus group discussion, which highlighted the fact that when people are exposed to melancholic narratives, they tend to view it as a protective cloak that offers solace when characters show their emotional struggles. The process of self-reflection turns seclusion into an opportunity for soul-searching. Intensely resonating melancholic content that obscures time and makes emotional absorption more pronounced. Although others may find comfort after watching movies, some may be driven to higher levels of anxiety reflecting the double-sidedness of immersion with this kind of media.

Table 1. Paired Samples T-Test

Measure 1	Measure 2	t	df	p	Cohen's d	SE Cohen's d
Before	After	-10.334	61	<.001	-1.311	0.038

Note. For all tests, the alternative hypothesis specifies that Before is less than After.

Table 2. Descriptive

	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of Variation
Before	62	44.323	11.447	1.454	0.258
After	62	48.016	12.446	1.581	0.259

DISCUSSION

After a thematic analysis of the data that emerged from the focus group discussion of 15 participants, following significant themes were identified:

Solace in Solitude

Loneliness as a negative emotional state involves sadness, negative- self perceptions, feelings of exclusion and is often linked to perceived lack of desired relationships, difficulty connecting to others and negative thinking patterns about oneself and others (Verity et al., 2021). This often morphs into a coping mechanism with continuous exposure to melancholic media. As individuals immerse themselves in narratives characterized by negative themes, they find solace in the portrayal of protagonists navigating their emotional turmoil in solitude. Over time, loneliness ceases to be solely a distressing emotional state but transforms into a refuge—a space for introspection and self-reflection. This transformation occurs as individuals identify with characters who are navigating their own emotional distress, resonating deeply with their own experiences. Loneliness becomes a familiar companion, offering a false sense of control amidst the chaos of emotions. Through withdrawal from social interactions, individuals seek comfort in their solitude, finding a sense of agency in their ability to navigate their internal struggles independently. However, this reliance on loneliness as a coping mechanism comes with inherent risks. Normalizing solitude can perpetuate feelings of social disconnection and emotional distress, leading

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individuals to retreat further into their isolation. This cyclic pattern reinforces the reliance on loneliness as a primary means of emotional regulation, hindering individuals from seeking out healthier avenues for social connection and support. Consequently, loneliness becomes ingrained as a habitual response to emotional distress, prohibiting individuals from fostering meaningful relationships and ultimately impacting their overall sense of well-being. As summarized by one of the participant:

“So, loneliness may become like a coping mechanism, something that helps you navigate through your problems”

Disturbing Resonance

When exposed to melancholic content, individuals often find themselves resonating with the depicted emotions, themes, or narratives, triggering a cascade of memories intertwined with similar feelings of loss, nostalgia, or existential angst. The resonance experienced by individuals watching melancholic content operates on multiple levels. Firstly, it manifests as an automatic reaction, where viewers find themselves emotionally stirred by the portrayal of human suffering, longing, or despair. As viewers witness characters struggling with profound existential questions or navigating through problems, they find their own inner struggles and experiences in it, thus forging a deep empathetic connection.

Moreover, the resonance extends beyond mere emotional identification to encompass a cognitive and reflective dimension. Viewers may find themselves reflecting on their own past experiences, relationships, or existential dilemmas prompted by the content they consume. The melancholic portrayal serves as a mirror reflecting back upon viewers. In this sense, resonating with the scenes serves as a catalyst for inviting viewers to confront their own life's uncertainties. The memories triggered by viewing the content are not always pleasant- they can evoke feelings of sadness, regret, or longing eventually culminating into loneliness and loneliness is said to hamper one's subjective well-being (Bhagchandani, 2017). Yet, despite the discomfort, individuals may find solace in the validation of their emotional experiences through shared narratives depicted in melancholic media. This validation can be particularly potent for those who feel isolated or misunderstood in their emotional struggles, offering a sense of connection and belonging in shared human experiences of suffering and loss.

In The Zone

The media often immerses an individual in a state of emotional absorption (Green et al., 2004). This immersion often leads to a suspension of reality, as participants found themselves transported into the emotional realms evoked by the media. During the exposure to melancholic clips, participants described a sense of being enveloped by a somber atmosphere, where their attention was captivated by the human emotion portrayed on screen. In this state, viewers were acutely attuned to the introspective dialogue, somber imagery, and melancholic settings, fostering a deep emotional engagement with the content. Thus a potential consequence of consuming melancholic content is a sense of time distortion or suspension. The passage of time becomes inconsequential as viewers delve deeper into the emotional landscapes presented, losing themselves in the narrative unfolding before them. This temporal distortion enhances the sense of immersion, allowing viewers to linger in moments of emotional intensity and resonance. However, the experience of being in the “flow” state with melancholic media is not purely positive. While some individuals may find solace and catharsis in immersing themselves in such content, others may experience heightened distress and emotional vulnerability. The immersive nature of melancholic media

can then potentially lead to a downward spiral of loneliness. As summarized by a participant:

“I was caught off guard when the clip ended- like when you are watching such movies you are kind of immersed in it and don’t expect it to end”

Limitations and Future Scope

The study’s findings should be interpreted within the context of a few limitations. Firstly, the sample consisted exclusively of college students with regular media consumption habits, potentially limiting the generalizability of the results to broader demographics. Additionally, the study focused solely on immediate changes in loneliness levels following exposure to melancholic content, neglecting potential long-term effects and habituation. Moreover, reliance on self-reported measures like the UCLA Loneliness Questionnaire may introduce biases, such as subjective interpretations of loneliness.

To address these limitations and advance research in this area, future studies could adopt longitudinal designs to track participants’ media habits and loneliness levels over time, providing insights into the enduring effects of media exposure. Cross-cultural comparisons could further elucidate how cultural factors influence individuals’ responses to melancholic content. Additionally, qualitative exploration through in-depth interviews or ethnographic methods could offer deeper insights into the subjective experiences of individuals.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study bring to light how exposure to melancholic narratives with differing levels of loneliness brings about complicated interactions with one’s emotional responses. The participants’ loneliness levels visibly increased after they were exposed to the melancholic content. Moreover, the focus group discussions revealed that individuals tended to seek comfort in the grim narratives which resulted in further aggravation of loneliness. We have identified some limitations such as using self-report measures and a homogeneous sample of participants which may need to be considered when interpreting the findings. To expand knowledge on this subject matter, future research should adopt longitudinal designs and cross-cultural based set-ups, coupled with qualitative approaches to ascertain the impact of melancholic media consumption of people’s affect over a longer period and under varied circumstances. This will aid in our understanding of how our psychological wellbeing is affected by exposure to media for depression or other mentally ill patients.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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