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BLURRING BOUNDARIES: UNDERSTANDING THE FORMATION AND IMPACT OF PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

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BLURRING BOUNDARIES: UNDERSTANDING THE FORMATION AND IMPACT OF
PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

By

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to explore the formation and influence of parasocial relationships (PSRs) in the digital age. This paper focuses on the ways media technologies facilitate an illusion of intimacy in the audience-media relationship. Parasocial relationships refer to one-way emotional attachments formed between fans and celebrities who are unaware of their existence. With the rise of digital media, these bonds have become more interactive and emotionally immersive due to features like self-disclosure, media visibility through algorithms, and micro-interactions between creators and users. To analyze the mechanisms of parasocial relationships and their evolution in the digital world, this paper relies on previous studies concerning attachment styles, emotional gratification, and media use. Through a literature-based approach supported by illustrative online examples, this study attempts to understand the underlying psychological and social processes behind PSRs as well as broader implications for mental health and digital culture. Ultimately, this project proposes a parasocial spectrum framework to conceptualize varying levels of emotional intensity and provides suggestions for healthy boundaries to help individuals engage more thoughtfully with online personalities and navigate fan cultures responsibly.

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Introduction

As life becomes more mediated, humans create emotional ties not only with individuals belonging to their close environment but also with media stars whom they have never personally met. These asymmetrical relationships, parasocial relationships (PSRs), define media use in the modern age. Originally, PSRs were discussed in relation to mass media such as television or radio; however, in the modern age, these are most prominent in digital spaces where influencers, streamers, and online personalities maintain ongoing visibility and interactions with audiences despite an absence of mutual awareness (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Dibble et al., 2015). This is especially true due to the emergence of technology-based platforms. Parasocial relationships can form within a much larger range of contexts, including interactions with online content creators and influencers (De Bérail et al., 2019).

The significance can be best explained through the nature of social media sites like YouTube and Twitch, where internet personalities routinely share aspects of their personal lives and engage directly with audiences. The sense of accessibility enhances the feeling of intimacy and connection, leading to increased parasocial experience (De Bérail et al., 2019). Within this framework, brief interactions through comments, responses, and even live interactions can intensify emotional investment, even though the relationship remains fundamentally asymmetrical (Hoffner & Bond, 2022).

In the present scenario, where PSRs have gained prominence as a function of digital environments, they are recognized as an important component of media use behavior in which people actively seek media content that fulfills their psychological and social needs for companionship, identity exploration, and emotional regulation (Katz et al., 1973). Social media sites further support this phenomenon by enhancing both the frequency of exposure and the

perceived authenticity of media figures, reinforcing heightened emotional involvement in parasocial relations (De Bérail et al., 2019; Hoffner & Bond, 2022).

Building on the growing significance of parasocial relationships in contemporary digital environments, this study examines how these one-sided emotional bonds form and function within online media contexts. Parasocial relationships are characterized by one-way emotional connections established with media personalities who are unaware of their existence but are still experienced as emotionally meaningful and socially relevant (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Dibble et al., 2015). In digital environments, PSRs are facilitated by regular engagement, perceptions of accessibility, and social media features that promote feelings of intimacy and familiarity (De Bérail et al., 2019).

The present study will be centered on the variables that affect PSRs, which include personal and emotional attachment processes, gratification, and engagement with media. It also considers how social media platforms magnify these variables and how they enable interactions and reciprocal communication in inherently asymmetric relationships (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Furthermore, while there is evidence of both the positive and negative impacts of PSRs (Hoffner & Bond, 2022), these aspects are still examined independently in the literature. This study addresses that gap by proposing a more structured, spectrum-based conceptualization that organizes existing findings into a continuum of engagement and effect, rather than treating parasocial relationships as either beneficial or harmful in isolation.

In an attempt to understand more about parasocial relationships and how they function, the analysis will also be aided by practical examples from online media content. Through this, the paper will explore the dynamics of parasocial relationships across a spectrum of intensity and outcome by highlighting not only their benefits but also their potential risks.

Origins of Parasocial Theory

The concept of parasocial relationships (PSRs) was originally coined by Horton and Wohl (1956), who created the term "para-social interaction" to refer to the appearance of relationships similar to face-to-face relationships between audiences and media individuals. The researchers differentiated between parasocial interactions (PSIs) and parasocial relationships, which were described as momentary responses to media use and long-lasting emotional associations with the media figure, respectively (Dibble et al., 2015). Unlike PSIs, which happened at the moment of media interaction, often induced by direct address and conversational cues, PSRs lasted beyond the immediate moment of exposure and resembled regular social relationships.

The initial studies concerning PSRs mostly focused on traditional media figures, including television anchors, radio show hosts, and fictional characters. Horton and Wohl (1956) believed that the "seeming relationships" shared many similarities with interpersonal relationships, but did not have a reciprocal nature because audiences were never socially acknowledged by media figures.

As media environments evolved, so too did the types of figures that audiences formed attachments with. Following up on previous research, Kurtin et al. (2019) extend the parasocial theory by discussing PSRs with musicians and showing that higher exposure and authenticity strengthened relational significance. This shift is indicative of an even broader change that has occurred in parasocial theories in recent years, in which boundaries separating performers and personas have become increasingly blurred.

Digitalization brought a new dimension of interactive visibility, and the audience gained a unique opportunity to interact with celebrities. This change is described by Kurtin et al. (2019),

emphasizing that the anticipation of interaction itself becomes part of the parasocial experience, describing the phenomenon as a collapse in the boundary between public and private personas. It is worth noting that the nature of PSRs can differ significantly depending on whether one deals with micro-celebrities or more popular personalities. Xu et al. (2022) confirm this hypothesis by revealing that micro-celebrities stimulate more perceived interaction and companionship compared to their mainstream counterparts. This suggests that parasocial theory must now account for structural differences in media visibility and accessibility, rather than treating all celebrity relationships as equivalent.

Attachments and the Compensatory Model

Parasocial relationships have to be understood not merely in terms of media exposure, but rather in terms of relational dynamics that individuals bring into these relationships. One of the key elements that has been found to play an essential role in explaining parasocial relationships is attachment styles. It helps account for why some parasocial relationships develop more intensely than others and why they are more emotionally significant and have different developmental trajectories. Attachment theory suggests that early relational experiences shape expectations about closeness, trust, and emotional availability, which in turn influence how individuals engage with media figures as alternative or supplementary sources of connection (McCutcheon et al., 2006; De Bérail et al., 2019).

Building on this foundation, Tukachinsky and Stever (2018) conceptualize parasocial relationships as developing through structured stages that parallel real interpersonal relationships, including initiation, intensification, maintenance, and integration. The first stage of the proposed parasocial relationship development, initiation, refers to the creation of preliminary impressions associated with curiosity, similarity, and emotional appeal. At this point,

attachment-related tendencies influence the likelihood of continued engagement, as individuals vary in their motivation to reduce uncertainty and seek perceived relational security through media figures.

During the intensification process, the importance of attachment processes increases since the nature of parasocial relationships turns from curiosity into emotional involvement. People who suffer from an anxious-preoccupied type of attachment tend to form intense parasocial relationships as media figures may be perceived as emotionally safe, consistently available, and non-rejecting (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2018). Intensification is defined by the development of emotional dependency, regular media exposure, and a growing sense of intimacy, all of which reflect the characteristics of real relationship dynamics. In the case of those who had insecure attachments, parasocial relationships might act as compensation mechanisms to cover certain needs for belongingness and emotional reassurance. This compensatory role is supported by the study of De Bérail et al. (2019), who found that individuals with higher levels of social anxiety are more likely to develop intense parasocial relationships, especially in the online context, where interaction seems to be less stressful than in face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, according to McCutcheon et al. (2006), insecure attachment is associated with stronger emotional investment in celebrities, suggesting that parasocial relationships could substitute for the lack of emotional safety in real-life interactions.

At more advanced phases of parasocial relationship development, such as maintenance and integration, attachment-based factors might affect increasing psychological dependence and identity involvement. According to Tukachinsky and Stever (2018), the phase of integration is defined as the point at which media persons become included in self-concepts in terms of affecting behavior, values, and emotions. Although this kind of identification with media

personalities does not indicate any dysfunctional behavior, attachment theories help to understand why different people might experience psychological dependence to different degrees during the process of parasocial relationship formation.

In summary, attachment theories provide a useful basis for considering the reasons why parasocial relationships can differ in intensity and psychological aspects among diverse individuals. In particular, they demonstrate that variations in security experiences might influence people's behaviors, emotional commitment, and psychological involvement in relations with media personalities. This distinction between adaptive engagement and escalating emotional dependence constitutes an important basis for discussing the psychological outcomes of parasocial relationships, from relatively healthy forms of connection to more maladaptive and extreme manifestations.

Defining the Boundaries: Healthy vs. Unhealthy Behavior

Previous research suggests that parasocial relationships can function in adaptive and beneficial ways when they remain emotionally supportive and grounded in reality. According to Hoffner and Bond (2022), parasocial relationships, although unidirectional in nature, may prove to be significantly beneficial for the well-being of individuals. Owing to the increased use of social media, the sense of intimacy may be further enhanced by self-disclosure from media personalities coupled with engagement via likes, comments, and shares. While these exchanges do not result in reciprocity, they may foster intimacy and authenticity, making media personalities appear more approachable and socially present (Hoffner & Bond, 2022).

Furthermore, healthy PSRs play a vital role in promoting coping and regulating emotions. People might seek support or comfort from media personalities during times of emotional strain and hardship. As suggested by Hoffner and Bond (2022), PSRs have the potential to help people

cope because they offer emotional security, stability, and reassurance. Emotionally salient experiences, including saying goodbye to the show or a celebrity death, demonstrate how similar to real-life experiences PSRs can be in their effect on emotions and yet promote adaptive behaviors, such as community mobilization and collective grieving.

Moreover, PSRs prove to be extremely important for helping individuals to establish identities and become happy. Hoffner and Bond (2022) state that celebrities can be seen as models and sources of inspiration for people in aspects of development, resilience, and self-improvement. Observing public figures can also allow individuals to examine their identity and core values without feeling judged, moreover, media figures can serve as powerful role models to boost self-confidence. In some cases, PSRs may also reduce stigma, particularly when media figures openly discuss mental health or personal struggles, encouraging more positive attitudes and behaviors.

A defining feature of healthy parasocial relationships is the maintenance of psychological boundaries. An individual may develop emotions towards famous people or celebrities while knowing that the bond is one-sided. According to Hoffner & Bond (2022), parasocial relationships are not inherently negative, they represent typical social processes of developing connections in contexts where intimacy is easily formed.

However, parasocial relationships become dysfunctional when emotional involvement becomes intense, inflexible, and unrealistic. In such instances, a parasocial relationship may evolve into psychological dependency, unstable self-concept, and weak boundaries between the person and the media personality. Pathological celebrity worship has been linked to cognitive predispositions, including absorption, dissociation, and fantasy-proneness (Sheridan et al., 2006). Absorption can lead people to become deeply involved in imaginary relations with media

celebrities, while dissociation impairs the ability to differentiate between imagination and reality. Those two aspects contribute to developing obsessive parasocial engagement, where media figures take the role of regulators of people's emotions and form their identity. As Sheridan et al. (2006) state, excessive celebrity worship is related to lower levels of psychological functioning and obsession, indicating that parasocial relationships may function as compensation for people's underlying insecurity or identity disturbances.

Pathological increase in such bonds is usually associated with concepts of "intense-personal" and "borderline-pathological" celebrity worship. In the case of intense-personal attachment, people experience an obsessive emotional connection with media celebrities (viewing a famous person as their soulmate) or feel an unusual personal connection to their life (McCutcheon et al., 2006). With borderline-pathological worship, cognitive and behavioral distortions are intensified. People may develop fantasies about reciprocal relations or be willing to do something inappropriate or even illegal for the sake of the media figures.

At the extreme end, literature on stalking provides an example of how parasocial obsession may culminate in dangerous behaviors. According to Meloy et al. (2008), there is a gradual progression from fixation to approach. Fixation is characterized by obsessive thoughts and constant media consumption and may advance to identification if the media user determines that a celebrity is personally meaningful to their character. Intrusion is the next step and is demonstrated through persistent communication attempts, gift-sending, stalking, spying, and other invasive actions. More severe cases continue progressing towards approach behaviors, from travelling to the place of the celebrity to trying to make direct contact, and may ultimately lead to threats, assaults, and in the worst-case scenarios, lethal violence (Meloy et al., 2008).

One of the mechanisms contributing to the problem is the erosion of boundaries. Media use creates a sensation of closeness and personal connection to the object of interest. As a consequence, individuals start to believe that they are personally involved in the relationship and develop a sense of entitlement and identity fusion. When reality confronts people's ideas, they may experience feelings of rejection, envy, or narcissistic injury, leading to increased fixation and maladaptive behavior (Meloy et al., 2008).

In general, dysfunctional parasocial relationships cannot be characterized with admiration *per se* but rather by the strength, rigidity, and psychological purpose they serve. As a matter of fact, when parasocial relationships substitute for reality, confirm identity issues, and depend on fantasies for achieving emotional satisfaction, these relationships turn maladaptive and lead to obsession, stalking, and even violence in extremely rare cases (Sheridan et al., 2006; Meloy et al., 2008).

Social Media and the Influencer Perspective

In light of the psychological advantages and disadvantages inherent in parasocial relationships, there needs to be an examination of how parasocial interaction is affected by the contexts in which these interactions take place. For example, the advent of social media has changed how these kinds of relationships develop through the addition of constant presence, interaction, and monetization of the "relationship" that occurs between the audience and the media personality.

According to Kowert et al. (2021), this type of interaction is referred to as "one-and-a-half sides" parasocial relationships because of how close individuals feel to each other as a result of perceived accessibility, as well as microinteractions such as liking, commenting, or chatting during broadcasts. Although these interactions may foster a sense of

reciprocity, the parasocial relationship that develops here is one-sided. This perceived responsiveness may cause increased emotional involvement because individuals believe that their interactions are meaningful relational signals (Kowert et al., 2021).

While this increased interactivity can strengthen feelings of connection for audiences, it also produces distinct pressures for content creators. Emebo (2025) describes the phenomenon of “trans-parasocial relationships,” in which influencers become the recipients of emotional obligations on the part of their followers. As influencers create parasocial bonds with their audience, they are expected to remain emotionally accessible, authentic, and responsive. Consequently, the process becomes an emotional burden for creators, who feel responsible for the creation of content as well as the management of the emotions of their audience. This factor contributes to creator burnout and identity strain (Emebo, 2025). According to Adamian (2024), Twitch streamers experience performative intimacy, where viewers treat them as their acquaintances, expecting emotional disclosure and attentiveness constantly, even though the connection between the two parties remains inherently one-sided.

From the viewpoint of the audience, these channels intensify the parasocial experience through greater exposure and greater authenticity. According to De Bérail et al. (2019), the use of YouTube is significantly correlated with the intensity of parasocial relationships, especially when creators self-disclose frequently and maintain continuous content generation. These features can reinforce emotional closeness, especially among individuals with social anxiety or limited offline social support, and may contribute to compensatory media use patterns.

Further research by Xu et al. (2022) indicates that not all media personalities are associated with equally high levels of parasocial relationships. While mainstream celebrities are sources of admiration and idealization, micro-celebrities appear to foster interaction and

companionship instead. However, according to Xu et al., (2022), despite such a perception of greater interactivity and engagement, there is no evidence of the authenticity and intimacy of the relationship. Interestingly, Xu et al. (2022) also found that while micro-celebrities are perceived as more interactive, they are not necessarily viewed as more authentic or intimate, suggesting that perceived closeness does not always directly translate into deeper emotional bonding. This highlights how parasocial experiences are shaped not only by platform affordances but also by the type of media figure and the structure of their visibility.

Taken together, these considerations imply that social media spaces create an environment where parasocial relationships develop further and acquire features of interaction rather than simple exposure. However, it is also necessary to note that parasocial interaction is inherently structured in terms of imbalance despite the illusion of equal interaction. This duality between perceived intimacy and actual imbalance becomes central to understanding parasocial engagement in contemporary digital culture.

Methods and Focus

This study utilizes qualitative methods of reviewing literature to investigate the process of formation, consequences, and intensity of PSRs. Specifically, this study examines how PSRs are formed through psychological processes such as attachment, media affordance, and psychological gratification. The literature search on PSRs started broadly by using keyword searches of the literature in peer-reviewed literature databases. This was followed by a gradual reduction of sources, depending on the importance of the source to the study and its theoretical and empirical contribution to the field. This funneling process allowed for the refinement of sources into a more cohesive body of literature organized around key psychological and

relational mechanisms. Approximately seventeen key sources of information were ultimately selected, prioritizing highly cited and foundational works in parasocial research.

Among these sources, particular emphasis was placed on studies examining how attachment styles and uses and gratifications theory influence parasocial development. This was due to the ability of the theories to provide insight into how the formation of the phenomenon takes place, as well as the reasons for its diversity. Specifically, attachment style theory can help understand individual psychological characteristics such as emotional intimacy, relational security, and dependence patterns. At the same time, uses and gratifications theory helps understand the motivational functions of media consumption, which include companionship and identity exploration, emotional regulation, and others. Additional focus was placed on the behavioral, psychological, and emotional consequences of parasocial relationships, particularly variations in intensity and the conditions under which these relationships become more emotionally significant or maladaptive. Literature exploring new digital media platforms as an environment for developing parasocial relationships was included as well.

To create the parasocial intensity spectrum, the literature selected was analyzed using generalizations based on existing theories of interpersonal and parasocial relationship development. The existing categorizations of the stages of parasocial interactions' development were used as theoretical guides rather than as absolute descriptions of reality. Using them as guides, certain generalizations could be formulated concerning how the relationship is developed depending on the level of its intensity. Following this process, each point on the intensity spectrum is described by synthesized behavioral, emotional, and cognitive characteristics, illustrating manifestations of parasocial relationships at different stages of involvement. To add context to this conceptualization, informal observational data were gathered from online forums

where people discuss issues on a voluntary basis. Although this data was not considered as empirical research material, it helped understand what kind of language and behaviors are used during parasocial interactions on an everyday basis, which corresponded to certain degrees of parasocial involvement described in the literature.

Proposed Spectrum

The parasocial spectrum was created as a conceptual framework that allows for visualizing the significant differences in parasocial relationships, particularly when looking at emotional investment, behavioral investment, and psychological outcomes. The spectrum itself is not concerned about determining whether parasocial relationships are good or bad; rather, its purpose is to demonstrate that there is a wide range of engagement with parasocial relationships and to address the absence of a comprehensive visual model. This framework was created to better capture the complexity of parasocial relationships by recognizing that they can range from light, casual media engagement to extreme forms of fixation or boundary collapse.

The spectrum conceptually was created around two primary dimensions. The first dimension is that of the level of parasocial attachment, or the degree to which a person has become emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally attached to a media figure. This level of attachment can vary from a person who has had a casual connection to a media figure to a person who has achieved a greater degree of development with that media figure and has reached a higher level of commitment in terms of his/her social, emotional, and cognitive relationship to that media figure. The second dimension of the spectrum is the range of outcomes (i.e., positive, negative) that can be associated with each type of engagement. For example, people may receive enjoyment, companionship, and/or a sense of community through their engagement at lower levels of the parasocial spectrum, while at higher levels of the parasocial spectrum, they may

experience emotional substitution, skewed relational expectations, and/or maladaptive fixation from their experience. However, most importantly, this project also expands beyond audience-centered frameworks. By adding a media figure section to the spectrum as well, it considers parasociality as a bidirectional phenomenon, impacting not only media users but also the creators as well.

The development of the process started with the recognition of patterns of development in relation to development, which were modified according to the parasocial setting. Instead of creating hard categories that would generalize people's experiences, the concept was framed as a continuum of increased levels of intensity, which would represent typical patterns of parasocial interaction. The fact that parasocial relationships take place in social media led to the inclusion of modern examples to make the definition relevant to real-life experiences. It is important to note that the examples used for defining the concept do not intend to serve as clinical definitions but rather provide a basis for illustration.

As illustrated in Figure 1 of the Appendix, the first stage, Passive Consumption, is characterized by low levels of parasocial engagement where the interest is casual, entertaining, and involves low-level commitment. Individuals may relate to media characters out of the desire to enjoy themselves, entertain themselves, or interact out of leisurely pursuits. The tripleS “Finding My Destiny” Sonyo quiz is an example of gamified personalization and light identification. The personality quiz helps in identifying which member matches the user’s personality.

At Habitual Following, there is continuous media consumption where parasocial engagement starts to form a part of everyday life. In this case, media individuals are used to help create a sense of comfort or companionship. For instance, in Figure 1, a rural teacher spends

most of his time listening to podcasts, especially during his free time, since there are few other social interactions in the area.

Emotional Attachment marks an even deeper involvement in which the media personalities begin affecting the person's self-concept, emotional control, or goals. At this stage, the media character becomes inspirational and motivational to some extent. As shown in Figure 1, a fan describing Taylor Swift as someone who makes them feel hopeful and inspires better artistic expression demonstrates how a media figure can shape emotional resilience, creativity, and aspects of identity development. This level is not inherently maladaptive but reflects stronger personal significance.

Social Substitution represents a more intense form of parasocial investment where the fan's life or the media character's life begins filling an emotional void in place of other factors outside of the personality. This level of intensity involves emotional overidentification, which results in actions that are social and sometimes symbolic and are performed due to the media personality. Figure 1 highlights fans manifesting revenge or paying for symbolic “hexes” against Klay Thompson following a cheating scandal. While not always clinically dangerous, this level suggests increased boundary blurring, emotional overinvestment, and behavioral escalation tied to perceived personal stakes.

Finally, in Figure 1, Pathological Attachment is defined by extreme cases of parasocial obsession marked by intense boundary violations, dysfunctional relational assumptions, or potentially life-threatening results. The Pathological Attachment stage may involve obsessive stalking or delusional thinking that disregards social boundaries. The murder of actress Rebecca Schaeffer by an obsessed fan serves as a tragic example of parasocial attachment escalating into

stalking, intrusion, and lethal violence. This level demonstrates the most severe potential outcome of parasocial escalation, where imagined intimacy becomes destructive.

The spectrum was initially designed as a visual line model emphasizing movement from healthy to harmful engagement; however, it risked oversimplifying nuanced behaviors. An initial line model focused on gradual development in terms of positive and negative engagement and thus risked presenting some actions incorrectly. A chart-based format offered greater flexibility by allowing each level to include descriptive traits, audience outcomes, creator implications, and concrete examples. This structure preserves the visual clarity of a spectrum while allowing for multidimensional analysis.

Ultimately, the parasocial spectrum was developed to serve as a practical and conceptual tool for understanding parasocial relationships not as binary experiences, but as evolving forms of engagement shaped by intensity, motivation, behavior, and consequence. By combining descriptive levels with real-world examples, the framework aims to make parasocial theory more accessible while highlighting the diverse ways these relationships function in contemporary media culture.

Suggestions on “Healthy” Parameters

While parasocial relationships are not necessarily negative and can even be beneficial for mental health, studies suggest that their effects are contingent upon the regulation process and the incorporation of these relationships into one’s personal and social life. Instead of eliminating parasocial interactions, the available literature indicates the necessity to practice balanced and conscious interaction with media personalities to avoid unhealthy attachment and emotional overinvestment (Hoffner & Bond, 2022; Tukachinsky et al., 2020).

The key aspect of healthy interaction with media personalities lies in the understanding of their asymmetrical nature. Even though social media platforms can make it seem like the interaction is reciprocal due to the possibility of commenting, liking, and occasionally receiving attention from the other party, the relationship remains one-sided (Dibble et al., 2015). Keeping oneself aware of this fact may help avoid forming unrealistically high expectations, which are characteristic of parasocial attachment that is maladaptive (McCutcheon et al., 2006).

The other important parameter is avoiding emotional substitution, where parasocial bonds begin to replace rather than complement real-life social relationships. It is observed that parasocial relationships become adaptive in their nature only when they supplement social ties rather than substituting them, i.e., in providing companionship, identity exploration, or emotional support (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Individuals whose emotional regulation starts relying on their media characters tend to become prone to being dependent and isolated from society.

The involvement in social interactions outside the digital realm becomes yet another important protective factor in such scenarios. As Tukachinsky et al. (2020) state, parasocial relations have some similarities with interpersonal connections, implying that any shortcomings or strengths concerning the person's social life will affect their parasocial relations. Maintaining consistent participation in direct relationships will help maintain a balance and minimize the possibility of parasocial connections becoming substitutes for the social needs of the individual.

Furthermore, restricting the intensity of the engagement with media characters and media use can also assist in the regulation of emotional involvement. As noted by de Bérail et al. (2019), more intensive and engaging media engagement results in higher parasocial bonds and, in particular instances, maladaptive behavior regarding media use. While there is nothing wrong

with consistent engagement, establishing limits to such activities can serve as a way to avoid any escalation of the relationship with the media content into maladaptive attachment.

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that none of the recommended guidelines are aimed at preventing parasocial relationships but rather facilitating their inclusion within a comprehensive approach to using media content healthily. According to Hoffner & Bond (2022), parasocial relations have been proven to provide psychological advantages, in addition to being responsible for personal identity development. Thus, a healthy approach should focus more on ensuring parasocial relations remain contextual, bounded, and complementary to real-world social life than avoiding them altogether.

Significance

In today's world, the importance of the topic under study is emphasized by the growing trend of parasocial interaction becoming normalized. Social media services such as YouTube and Twitch offer users an opportunity to interact with media content in a much more interactive way compared to mass media. Moreover, influencers' tendency to involve people in personal life and direct interaction makes parasocial relationships even closer (De Bérail et al., 2019; Hoffner & Bond, 2022).

In this way, parasocial interaction can no longer be regarded as a rarity but rather a phenomenon that has found its place in people's everyday lives while communicating through media channels. It should be highlighted that this increase in accessibility has brought along new challenges concerning emotional involvement in these one-sided relationships. An excessive investment, for example, can cause harmful effects such as the development of compulsive behavior and social comparison (De Bérail et al., 2019). Given these shifts, understanding the

structure and intensity of parasocial relationships is increasingly important for interpreting how individuals navigate identity, connection, and emotional regulation in digital spaces.

Academically, this approach adds to the body of knowledge on parasocial interaction theory, shifting from the stage models of development of parasocial relationships into an integrative approach accounting for differences in the functions of their consequences. Prior work has established that parasocial relationships are similar to interpersonal relationships with regard to such aspects as attraction, intimacy, and the way these processes are maintained (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2018; Tukachinsky et al., 2020). However, the existing models highlight their development without focusing on differential consequences.

Through the inclusion of findings from previous research on both positive and negative impacts, this paper builds on findings concerning how PSRs may be employed to not only enhance one's psychological health owing to companionship, self-perception, and less loneliness but also impair them through dependency, seclusion, and unrealistic expectations (Hoffner & Bond, 2022; De Bérail et al., 2019). This duality suggests the need for an approach that can explain the variability in impact rather than assuming that PSRs have either all positive or all negative influences.

Practically, this research holds significance for several parties, including media users, content creators, and mental health practitioners. Media consumers will find an increased awareness of the parasocial phenomena helpful in being more reflective about their relationships with online personalities, especially regarding the need to recognize that these relationships are asymmetrical and do not substitute for real-life interactions. However, a better understanding of how parasocial interactions occur can allow content creators and influencers to avoid burnout by

constructing healthier connections with their followers since they would be made aware of the strain of unrealistic expectations towards connection (Emebo, 2025; Adamian, 2024).

As far as clinicians and scholars are concerned, a more organized approach to parasocial intensity can be instrumental in identifying instances where connections are adaptive and instances when they are a sign of other problems, like social anxiety disorder, insecure attachment, or excessive reliance on media sources (De Bérail et al., 2019; McCutcheon et al., 2006). In essence, a more precise analysis of the studied concept can facilitate the distinction between appropriate media consumption and media consumption that might need further investigation by specialists in psychology. By structuring existing findings into a more coherent framework, this research aims to support more informed interpretations of parasocial relationships in both academic and applied contexts.

Future Directions

Future research could strengthen this framework through empirical testing across different platforms to examine how platform features influence parasocial intensity, audience behavior, and creator burden differently. Because platforms vary in interactivity, monetization, and accessibility, comparative studies could help clarify which environments are more likely to encourage certain types of engagement, maladaptive behaviors, or creator burnout.

However, most importantly, a greater emphasis on cross-cultural and demographic variation is needed to better understand how parasocial relationships develop across diverse populations and social environments. Factors like age, attachment style, developmental stage, social context, and cultural norms may significantly influence movement across the parasocial spectrum. For example, adolescents in socially isolated contexts may experience parasocial bonds differently compared to older adults. Aspects like cultural differences in collectivism may

also contribute to shaping whether engagement remains adaptive, neutral, or maladaptive. Expanding this framework across different contexts would strengthen its broader applicability, validity, and provide a more nuanced understanding of how parasocial outcomes vary across different lived experiences.

Conclusion

The development of parasocial relationships has been inevitable in our digital age, with the proliferation of celebrity figures, influencers, and live streamers who have become much easier to get in touch with. As this review shows, the impact of PSRs is not necessarily positive or negative but depends heavily on the degree of involvement, the purpose, and the situation. In moderate cases, they provide companionship, inspiration, and even psychological support, whereas at higher degrees, they may be involved in promoting dependency, confusion, or unhealthy attachment. However, the nature of social media contributes significantly to both of these processes, creating an illusion of intimacy and encouraging regular micro-interactions, which make parasocial relationships appear more mutually supportive than they really are. Notably, this study takes into account the peculiarities of the modern mediated world, where boundaries tend to blur and create certain expectations on the part of the audience and the creator as well. Overall, this framework emphasizes the importance of understanding PSRs as a continuum and supports the need for greater awareness of healthy engagement in increasingly mediated social environments.

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Appendix

Spectrum of Parasocial Relationships

Level	Label	Description	Potential Positive Effects	Potential Negative Effects	Examples
1	Passive Consumption	Brief or occasional exposure to media figures with little emotional investment or perceived intimacy, limited emotional investment	Media Users: Mood boost, light entertainment, exposure Media Figure: Low pressure from audience, broad visibility and reach	Media Users: FOMO, mild distraction, time displacement Media Figure: Commodification as content	TripleS - Looking For my Destiny Sonyu quiz - Quiz released by the company matching fans with a member - Gamified personalization that encourages identification and routine engagement
2	Habitual Following	Repeated engagement with a media figure, often through subscriptions, fandom participation, or routine content consumption, mild familiarity or recognition develops	Media Users: Sense of routine and familiarity, social belonging Media Figures: Early community formation	Media Users: Emerging social comparison, early consumer influence Media Figures: Pressure to maintain visibility, expectations of personality performance	r/podcasts "I teach in rural Alaska and the only serious social contact I have is with the dozen or so other teachers, and even then I don't actually talk to some of them regularly. When I'm up there during the school year I spend almost every moment of my free time bingeing them." - Repeated, routine consumption
3	Emotional Attachment	Individuals experience affective responses to content creators, and the relationship may influence mood, identity, and coping behaviors, viewer believes they share a meaningful bond	Media Users: Strong sense of belonging, reduced loneliness, identity reinforcement and validation Media Figures: Deeply loyal fanbase, strong community support	Media Users: Mood tied to media figure, blurred reality boundaries, vulnerability to disappointment Media Figures: Emotional labor and pressure, higher scrutiny of personal behavior	r/TaylorSwift "This interview is so deeply inspiring to me. She makes me feel like everything could be ok. She makes me want to make better art." - Celebrity is shaping self-concept, goals, and creative identity.
4	Social Substitution	Media figures become primary sources of emotional comfort, identity reinforcement, or social interaction, engagement becomes more intense and emotionally necessary rather than optional.	Media Users: Emotional coping during hardship, substitute for social support Media Figures: Engaged and financially supportive audience	Media Users: Social withdrawal, overinvestment, isolation reinforcement Media Figures: Perceived responsibility for audience well-being, fan entitlement	Fans manifesting / paying Etsy witches to hex Klay Thompson over cheating scandal - Fans' extreme emotional investment and behavioral escalation into symbolic aggression
5	Pathological Attachment	Parasocial relationships involve distorted perceptions of reciprocity and personal entitlement, individuals may believe they have a real interpersonal relationship with the media figure	Media Users: Short-lived emotional fulfillment Media Figures: temporary publicity spikes	Media Users: Entitlement, delusion, aggression, neglect of real-life responsibilities Media Figures: Loss of privacy and safety risks, dehumanization by audience	Murder of actress Rebecca Schaeffer - An obsessed fan who located her through private investigative means, demonstrating extreme boundary collapse and fatal consequences

Parasocial Intensity

Figure 1. Proposed Spectrum of Parasocial Relationships

This table outlines five levels of parasocial intensity, arranged progressively from lower to higher degrees of attachment. Each level includes a brief description, associated effects, and potential positive and negative outcomes. The table distinguishes between impacts on media users and impacts on media figures, with illustrative examples provided in the far-right column.