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# Understanding Parasocial Relationships and the Mental Health Impact

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**UNDERSTANDING PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS  
AND THE MENTAL HEALTH IMPACT**

by

Leslee Bennett, B.A.

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Communications

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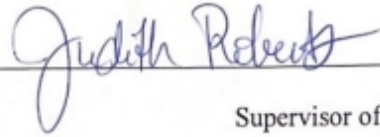
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**Leslee Bennett, B.A.**

entitled **Understanding Parasocial Relationships and the Mental Health Impact**

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts in Communication Studies, Comm. Technologies Concentration**



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## **ABSTRACT**

Parasocial relationships have recently become a topic of discussion in our society. This is because individuals are still looking for something to connect with after the COVID-19 pandemic. These relationships originally were more common among young people, but due to the constant usage of media, individuals have become more attached to popularity which results in an unrealistic online connection. Parasocial relationships are both a fascination and a danger due to the mental connections an individual makes within themselves. This research is a qualitative study of previous research done on parasocial relationships. Topics discussed in this thesis will cover multiple facets of parasocial relationships including those with public figures, and fictional characters.

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Author Leslee Bennett  
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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

As the world changes, so does the human mind. Advancements in technology continue to mold society as it strives for economic progress and search for the ultimate reason to keep going. With technological advancements comes less connection to reality. Social media, television, news, movies, and more outlets have created relationships for people who need a way to connect. Society has created a new landscape for social interaction and interpersonal engagement. This new landscape has resulted in what is called parasocial relationships which are developed when a person forms an attachment to another person, but the other person does not know they exist.

Based on research, parasocial relationships have become more apparent within the last five years due to the consistent rise of media, however, they have existed long before that. These types of relationships vary among people and contain different aspects within them. Throughout this research, parasocial relationships will be discussed by broadening the existing definition and discussing the different aspects that come with them. Research will also look back at the history of these relationships and examine some notable public figures such as Diana, Princess of Wales, Taylor Swift, and Marilyn Monroe.

Social connection is an important aspect that individuals fail to realize the importance of. Humans long for connections to something or someone and that is why “[w]hen people are asked what pleasures contribute most to happiness, the overwhelming



majority rate love, intimacy, and social affiliation above wealth or fame, even above physical health” (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). This was widely discovered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Society did not have in-person connections during the pandemic, from January 2020 to March 2023, as it did in previous years. Now that society has in-person connections back, there is still a struggle from the mental perspective. As this study of parasocial relationships will discuss the effect these relationships, have on a person, it will also go into how a person deals with the mental challenges of navigating life from fictional and real parasocial relationships. Navigating life can be hard on its own, but when parasocial relationships are factored in, it can either become a positive or negative aspect of a person’s journey.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Hypothesis

By diving into this research, it must be understood that all implications are related to the complex ideas of parasocial relationships and their influence on an individual's psychological well-being. The proposed questions aimed for discussion in this research are:

**Research Question 1:** “What roles do media platforms play in the intensity of parasocial relationships and how does that affect the different aspects of mental health?”

**Research Question 2:** “What historically has been shown to affect parasocial relationships?”

Through these questions, the hypothesis is that parasocial relationships are more than a relationship with a person and can have significant connections between attachment and mental health outcomes. These questions, along with other aspects of coping mechanisms, will contribute to the underlying theme of the connections between parasocial relationships, attachment theory, media ecology, and mental health.

The proposed questions give a framework for exploring the dynamics between parasocial relationships, media, and the psychological well-being of an individual. Researching media platforms allows for accurate examples of what is affecting an.

individual in today's society. Research on historical trends of parasocial relationships can show patterns throughout society and a broader perspective on the role these relationships have played throughout the years. Exploring coping mechanisms gives insight into how individuals navigate their parasocial connections which can make way for support and intervention from others experiencing the same things. These perspectives give a more constructive understanding of all the aspects of parasocial relationships and their continuous development.

The first question will examine the research on parasocial relationships and how media platforms influence their nature. The purpose of studying media sources and these relationships is to determine the psychological dynamics at play. Additionally, research also shows the potential consequences media can have on parasocial relationships and an individual's view on reality, interpersonal relationships, and self-esteem. Understanding these dynamics allows society to look within themselves and advocate for media literacy.

The second question dives deeper into the history of parasocial relationships. This will provide historical context of the relationships while also giving examples of notable public figures. The question also provides an outlet for examination into theories, such as the attachment theory, that provide more context for parasocial relationships. By incorporating these aspects, research will show the rise of parasocial relationships and give a deeper understanding of media consumers and public figures.

### **The History of Parasocial Relationships**

The term parasocial relationship was coined by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl in 1956, however, they have existed long before the term was created. The official definition for parasocial relationships "are one-sided relationships, where one person

extends emotional energy, interest and time, and the other party, the persona, is completely unaware of the other's existence" (Bennett et al., 2020,). This relationship usually is associated with public figures such as celebrities but it can also be connected to a social media following. For example, a person can follow another person on any social platform, however, the other person does not know the new follower but continues to allow them to look at their content. Parasocial relationships completely disregard rejection and create a gateway for individuals to believe they are friends with someone who does not know they exist.

This relationship could be associated with the attachment theory which is defined as a long-term relationship or bond "between people, including those between a parent and child and between romantic partners" (Cherry, 2023, par. 1). Parasocial relationships create a sense of attachment and belonging for a person. It is important to note that these relationships can have different meanings for an individual. They could either be platonic or romantic relationships with a person. Keep in mind, that the person on the other side of the relationship has no idea or a vague sense of this person's feelings about them. In a study conducted at Concordia University, St. Paul, Breanna Carlson and Frank Lien presented research on attachment styles' effect on parasocial relationships. These two researchers wanted to find connections between parasocial relationships and the likelihood of attachment styles affecting them. They also wanted to know if there were any connections between gender and parasocial relationships. Their results showcased that "[a]n individual's attachment styles may explain why they have more of a tendency to develop a parasocial relationship...an anxious attachment style, which is seen most often in parasocial relationships, the need to belong tends to be very high" (Carlson &

Lien, 2022). Attachment is the key factor in a parasocial relationship. If there is no attachment there is no relationship created. Media today is always evolving and constantly changing with time. Over the years, communication has become more effective because of technology. Research states that “[i]n order to maximize the effects of this online communication and marketing, researchers tend to investigate the relationship between followers and social media personae” (Zhuang, 2018).

As mentioned before, public figures are prone to have many parasocial relationships with individuals all over the world. For example, looking into the most recent pop culture phenomenon, Taylor Swift has created a fanbase that continues to grow every second of every day. For almost twenty years, she has been a relatable public figure for so many individuals. She writes songs about love, heartbreak, loss, joy, and any other feelings she wants to share with the world. Since these emotions relate to millions of individuals, her fans, “Swifties,” continue to support her in all her achievements and struggles as they also continue to live out their own lives.

A recent study of ten Indonesian Swifties was conducted to analyze how social media has impacted the emotional connections between Swift and her fans. Her music career spans over 15 years which involved a lot of media advancements. Due to this, “social media has been one of the biggest tools being utilized to create an online persona that cultivates an audience that supports her” (Zafina & Sinha, 2024). With the constant use of social media, fans can view almost every aspect of Swift’s personal life. Social media has amplified parasocial relationships to make them more relatable or personal to the fan or viewer. The modern take on parasocial relationships “in online spaces emphasizes how audience or media users have become active in the formation of

parasocial relationships and does not solely depend on celebrity's actions" (Zafina & Sinha, 2024). This study found that Swift's past social media usage intrigued her fans to interact with her. Through the celebrity's social media usage, Swifties felt more connected to her "when their idol shares personal parts of their lives as it allows them to feel a deeper connection" (Zafina & Sinha, 2024). Long-time fans of Swift continually watch her social media for updates on a new album, relationship status, and life experiences overall according to Zafina and Sinha. They conclude that "[s]ince Swift has become more open about her views on social media, fans have felt more understood and linked because they know they share Swift's values and beliefs" (Zafina & Sinha, 2024).

Parasocial relationships have also matured throughout the years with celebrities becoming so personal on their social media platforms or on reality TV shows. Sometimes, to get followers, celebrities will post about their feelings to make their viewers feel more "at home" or create a space where they feel valued and seen. In the past, parasocial relationships have been associated with loneliness and isolation. However, "research has decreased the stigma of such relationships and led clinicians to believe that such relationships can broaden one's social network rather than restrict it" (Bennett et al., 2020). Research has found that parasocial relationships have also helped individuals through tough times or even helped shape their identity. With social media, as it is today, these relationships are more easily accessed than in previous years.

Media has always been a part of society whether it is books, telephones, radio, television, or cell phones. One term that was coined due to the rise and obsession of media was media ecology. Media ecology is described as the way media shapes our environment and everyday lives. The overall idea "of the theory is that the

communication content doesn't exert nearly as much influence as the medium of communication itself does" (Sintelly, 2023). This phrase was created by Neil Postman, but it was inspired by Marshall McLuhan's theory. McLuhan was the first person to say that the study's main focus should be on the media and not the content that it communicates. Another theorist, Robert Logan, said that media ecology "is also based on feedback that flows back and forth between an environment and a medium" (Sintelly, 2023). Shobhit Ratan writes about new media ecology and this discusses the new media that has come into play and redefined the way we communicate. The difference between old media and new media is that "interactive new media provides an immersive experience in comparison to audio or text alone" (Ratan, 2020). The new media has made us aware of the socioeconomic and political environments across the world. It has set standards for societies and the government. It has changed the way our communication has become and is now at the fingertips of every person. Different media technologies exist and largely depend on societal acceptability. Ratan also states that "[i]t is largely believed that media singularity would be achieved by 2045" (Ratan, 2020, par. 8). Media ecology is very important today because we view life through different aspects of media such as the internet, digital media, and film to name a few. We use these media outlets to understand the world around us. Research continues to show that our society has become very dependent on media which has influenced our culture in many ways. The digital environment that media developed into has become a study that explains how media environments shape our lives in this digital age.

Entertainment media created an outlet for individuals to view celebrities and public figures differently. Before there was social media, newspapers and radio stations

gave a voice to the people behind the scenes providing news for individuals around the world. Newspapers provide an informational structure to the world while “[r]adio shares a technology, as well as informational and entertainment content, with television, but it is also very much like newspapers-providing a heavy dose of information and an orientation to reality” (Katz et al., 1973). When television was invented, people were immersed in multiple worlds of entertainment like never before. Throughout the years, television and movies have showcased beloved actors and characters for people to connect with. Due to this and the advancement of technology, individuals are more immersed in parasocial relationships than they realize.

A great example of a notable historical parasocial relationship is Diana, Princess of Wales. Princess Diana was and still is loved and adored by millions due to her honest nature. She made all of her struggles known towards the end of her life. She talked about topics such as her mental health, body image, and her husband’s affair. Not to mention, she was the person who helped the royal family become more likable to the public at a time when the monarchy was not well looked upon. According to the BBC Science Focus Magazine, “[w]hen a particular individual, and all their characteristics and actions, is being presented to you on a regular basis via newspapers and TV screens, it becomes increasingly hard *not* to have some form of emotional reaction to them, good or bad” (Burnett, 2022).

When the princess was tragically killed in a car accident in 1997, the whole world went into mourning. Millions of individuals brought flowers, notes, and memorabilia to the gates of Buckingham Palace. The news stations captured people crying in the streets because of the impact Diana had on them and “with the exception of a select handful of



people, those who mourned Princess Diana didn't actually know her" (Burnett, 2022). These people did not know her personally but they felt as if they had lost a family member. The emotion attached to Diana showed the strength and global impact of a parasocial relationship's effect on individuals. The queen had to address the public to assure them that they heard their cries and were also mourning with them. The public's fascination with the princess continues to this day with documentaries, books, articles, and television adaptations. It is still speculated that the princess's death was not an accident, which led to millions of people blaming it on the royal family because Diana was becoming too honest about the inner workings of the palace. The media's coverage of her stories still captures the attention of people worldwide and showcases how parasocial relationships can stay consistent throughout history.

### **Parasocial Relationships and Media**

Due to parasocial relationships, a person's mental health can easily be affected. Their identity could potentially be at risk when a parasocial relationship crosses a line from simply liking someone to an obsession. However, to understand our unique and complex minds better, individuals need to ask themselves if there is a way to deal with these relationships effectively and healthily. As it has been mentioned, the media has influenced each individual in some form. It affects our identity through all media sources such as television, social media, etc. Parasocial relationships are a part of the way that media has influenced us. Research has shown that "[parasocial relationships] on social media can promote healthy attitudes and behaviors and lower health-related stigma, but may adversely impact mental health through negative self-comparisons" (Hoffner, 2008).

Dr. Jill Emanuele from The Child Mind Institute states that “for some teens their social feeds can become fuel for negative feelings they have about themselves” (Jacobson, 2024). Social media has given younger generations a mindset that they need to look a certain way and do certain things to feel better about themselves. This has become more heightened because of the toxic aspects like trolling, mean comments, and other people creating a bad reputation for someone who never deserved it in the first place. Social media also can make a person feel lonely when looking at other peoples’ posts of them doing fun things, hanging with friends, or “living their best life.” It can make a person feel like they are not doing enough with their own life. With the growing media toxicity, it is difficult to stay in a healthy mindset and environment. That is why people turn to parasocial relationships so they can escape from the world around them. Social media serves as an environment to serve as online communication. It has been studied that viewers are more likely to have a greater connection to a celebrity because of their constant openness to the world.

When social media was first introduced, it was seen as revolutionary, and at the time, it was. However, social media has taken on a life of its own by “[transforming] the media landscape by providing individuals with the technical capability to compete with mass media in disseminating information, setting agendas, and framing conversations... [d]espite the promise offered by what social media makes technically possible, there is the matter of the socio-technical systems that emerge and evolve around these capabilities.” (Lin et al., 2014) American author and professor, Shoshanna Zuboff states in an interview with the Harvard Gazette that “[society] rushed to the internet expecting empowerment, the democratization of knowledge, and help with real problems, but

surveillance capitalism really was just too lucrative to resist” (Parsons, 2023). Parasocial relationships do not help the media ecology that has overtaken society. They continue to change our attention span to where individuals are more prone to pay attention less than they did before because of our constant media usage.

### **The Attention Economy**

Attention is valuable and with the technology created for today, there is an overabundance of media that is trying to maintain our attention to use their product, watch their show, read their book, and capture our attention with other marketable assets. Attention economy is a topic for researchers to note. Within the attention economy, “our attention is constantly bombarded with information, from social media, television, or news sources, such that it is difficult for one particular information source to truly captivate our attention and influence us” (Joy, 2021, par. 1). In our economy, attention has now become a type of product. Companies are continuing to create content for society to sink its teeth into. Individuals have become easily distracted, making companies create more engaging content through social media. Keeping the attention of individuals has become a company's greatest goal.

The attention economy continues to thrive by being “fed by a vicious cycle in which we are the product of the attention economy yet also the customer who is unknowingly manipulated into reinforcing it” (Joy, 2021, par. 1). For example, TikTok has become very popular in recent years. This app is a place where people can watch short videos that are catered to their liking. The videos created can range from funny, to sad, to giving advice, to skits, and so much more. The ideas are never-ending for a content creator on this app. However, like all things, there are flaws. In the early days of

the app, TikTok did not show the time on a person's phone while they were viewing the app. This made video-watching dangerous because people were not able to track their time spent on the app. They would continue to scroll and watch video after video until they realized it was too late and had spent three to four hours or more on the app. According to the official TikTok website, the company had to implement new time management features and safety settings such as "those aged 13-15 have their accounts set to private by default, enabling teens to make informed choices about what they choose to share, when, and with whom" (Keenan, 2023).

### **Parasocial Relationships in Early Adolescence**

In a study done by Tracy R. Gleason, Sally A. Theran, and Emily M. Newberg, they discuss the celebrity choices that adolescence makes and how gender also affects this process. Keep in mind that this study was also done in 2017, so the current age of college students was coming out of or in their early adolescence stage. Not many people realize that "[i]n comparison to adults or even undergraduates, the age differences between young adolescents and their favorite stars are greater" (Gleason et al., 2017). A celebrity's influence on adolescents might involve friendships or even hierarchical relationships with a mentor, coach, or non-parental figure. This can be due to the age difference between the adolescent and the celebrity.

The significance of a celebrity's influence has rarely been studied regarding the psychological aspect. Only a few studies have discussed parasocial relationships with racecar drivers and newscasters, but none have discussed relationships with actors or athletes. With the gender aspect, boys and girls have different preferences in television characters so therefore it is no surprise that they enjoy different celebrities as well. They

also go into three major aims for their study: “(1) to examine adolescents’ choices of media figures and celebrities for parasocial attention, (2) to explore the prevalence and construal of PSR in an adolescent sample, and (3) to ascertain whether gender differences emerged in adolescent parasocial processes” (Gleason et al., 2017). They hypothesized that actors and musicians would frequently be mentioned in the study as well as the types of celebrities chosen and their personalities the adolescents associate with them.

This study was done on 100 girls and 53 boys in ninth grade at a public high school in a US Northeastern suburb. All students were of different ethnicities and at least 75% had a parent who graduated from college. The types of celebrities that were studied were actors, athletes, singers, general celebrities like talk show hosts, and writers. The celebrities that fit into multiple categories were put into the category that they were best known for. For example, Oprah Winfrey is a talk show host but she is also an actress. The authors also studied “the characteristics adolescents admired in their chosen celebrities, as well as emotional and behavioral manifestations of PSI/PSR, such as participants’ level of involvement in parasocial activities, the emotional intensity of the experience, their dedication in finding out about their chosen celebrities, and whether they shared their interest in these media figures with friends and family” (Gleason et al., 2017).

The results of this study were described in three sections. They described the nature of adolescents’ parasocial activities, described the types of relationships that adolescents imagined having with their selected celebrity, and finally, discussed the content of adolescents’ parasocial processes. In the first section of the results, they go into detail about the celebrities chosen. In the study, the authors expected everyone to pick a living celebrity, however, two students named deceased media figures, Marilyn

Monroe and Audrey Hepburn. They included a figure (Table 1) that shows a chart of endorsements in celebrities:

**Table 1**

*Frequencies of Endorsement of Celebrity Type and Parasocial Relationship Quality*

Descriptive variables	Girls (n=100)%	Boys (n=53)%	Overall (N=153)%	Young adults <sup>a</sup> (N=79)%
Celebrity type				
Actor	77.0	50.9	68.0	38.7
Singer/musician	17.0	18.9	17.6	30.7
Athlete	0.0	15.1	5.2	14.7 <sup>b</sup>
Other (e.g. talk show host, comedian)	5.0	13.2	7.8	12.0
Writer	1.0	1.9	1.3	4.0
Parasocial Relationship Quality	(n=95)	(n=49)	(n=144)	
Friend	31.6	20.4	27.8	
Authority figure	22.1	55.1	33.3	
Celebrity	46.3	24.5	38.9	

<sup>a</sup> From Boon and Lomore (2001); includes 40 females and 39 males. <sup>b</sup>Category includes dancers for this sample.

The content described in the process was examined by the scores of the adolescents and the endorsement they had of their desired celebrity's characteristics. Their research showed that "adolescents reported a level of dedication to finding out about and/or thinking about their favorite celebrity that averaged between "less than once a week" and "several times a week" on the scale, and little sharing of their interest in the celebrity with either friends or family" (Gleason et al., 2017). They include a second table that gives representation to gender within parasocial processes (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Overall Means and Standard Deviations and Correlations Between Measures of Parasocial Processes within Gender*

Variable	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>7</u>
Personality	.034	0.33	-	0.28*	0.34*	0.32*	0.32*	0.20	0.06
Appearance	0.48	0.38	0.35***	-	0.44***	0.02	0.10	0.34*	-0.09
Talent	0.57	0.32	0.24*	0.28**	-	0.25+	0.17	0.03	0.11
Involvement	2.69	0.75	0.12	0.10	-0.01	-	0.63***	0.16	0.44**
Intensity	2.05	0.91	0.21*	0.09	-0.09	0.63***	-	0.26+	0.28+
Dedication	1.37	0.54	-0.02	0.10	-0.13	0.18+	0.28**	-	0.06
Sharing	0.51	0.31	0.06	-0.03	0.06	0.23*	0.20*	0.12	-

Correlations for boys are above the diagonal, and correlations for girls are below the diagonal. + $p \leq 0.10$ .

\* $p \leq 0.05$ . \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ .

The hierarchical parasocial relationship was also hypothesized and used three characteristics as dependent variables. As the authors expected, however, both parasocial involvement and emotional intensity (Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Means and Main Effects of Parasocial Relationship Type for Parasocial Processes*

Parasocial processes	PSR type			F(2,138) <sup>a</sup>	$p^b$	$\eta_p^2$
	Friend	Authority	Celebrity			
Personality	0.39 (0.34)	0.33 (0.29)	0.28 (0.33)	2.07	0.131	0.03
Appearance	0.59 (0.38)	0.36 (0.36)	0.50 (0.40)	1.81	0.168	0.03
Talent	0.53 (0.32)	0.57 (0.34)	0.59 (0.30)	0.30	0.742	0.00
Involvement	2.93 <sup>a</sup> (0.76)	2.87 <sup>a</sup> (0.61)	2.36 <sup>b</sup> (0.73)	12.34	0.000	0.15
Intensity	2.28 <sup>a</sup> (0.85)	2.23 <sup>a</sup> (0.94)	1.65 <sup>b</sup> (0.71)	9.92	0.000	0.13
Dedication	1.48 <sup>a</sup> (0.63)	1.41 <sup>a,b</sup> (0.53)	1.23 <sup>b</sup> (0.40)	4.12	0.018	0.06
Sharing	0.49 (0.33)	0.57 (0.30)	0.45 (0.31)	1.29	0.280	0.02

Within parasocial processes, values with different superscripts differ significantly ( $p \leq 0.022$ ). PSR, Parasocial relationship. <sup>a</sup>Error df was 136 for involvement and intensity and 130 for dedication and sharing. <sup>b</sup> $n=144$  for personality, appearance, and talent; 142 for involvement and intensity; and 136 for dedication and sharing.

Gender also was studied for personality and appearance where the girls factored in more strongly than the boys (Table 4).

**Table 4***Means and Main Effects of Gender for Parasocial Processes*

Parasocial processes	Girls			Boys			$F(1,138)^a$	$p^b$	$\eta_p^2$
	$n$	$M$	$SD$	$n$	$M$	$SD$			
Personality	95	0.38	0.32	49	0.22	0.30	12.61	0.001	0.08
Appearance	95	0.61	0.36	49	0.23	0.31	32.09	0.000	0.19
Talent	95	0.58	0.30	49	0.56	0.36	0.19	0.663	0.00
Involvement	95	2.69	0.77	47	2.69	0.71	1.16	0.285	0.01
Intensity	95	1.93	0.80	47	2.21	0.99	1.39	0.240	0.01
Dedication	90	1.27	0.46	46	1.53	0.60	6.14	0.015	0.05
Sharing	90	0.46	0.29	46	0.59	0.35	3.71	0.056	0.03

<sup>a</sup>Error df was 136 for involvement and intensity and 130 for dedication and sharing. <sup>b</sup> $n=144$  for personality, appearance, and talent; 142 for involvement and intensity; and 136 for dedication and sharing.

Lastly, they lay out the interaction between parasocial relationships and gender. It was expected that boys would appreciate talents more than girls, however, the interaction from the boys was significantly lower than the girls for celebrities (Table 5).

**Table 5***Means for Talent as a function of PSR Type and Gender*

Gender	PSR Type		
	Friend	Authority	Celebrity
Girls	0.51 (0.32)	0.51 (0.32)	0.65 <sup>y</sup> (0.26)
Boys	0.60 <sup>ab</sup> (0.34)	0.62 <sup>a</sup> (0.36)	0.38 <sup>bz</sup> (0.36)

Values with different superscripts a and b differ significantly within gender ( $p=0.026$ ); values with different superscripts y and z differ significantly between genders ( $p=0.007$ ).

During the study, the majority of the adolescents thought of their chosen celebrity in relationship terms. These types of individuals showed more dedication to the celebrity than the rest. The authors then discuss what is called “secondary attachments” which “do not include reciprocity and are described as providing a safe forum for the adolescent to experiment with different ways of being” (Gleason et al., 2017). They found that this was



consistent with the correlations of emotional intensity and endorsement of characteristics. Future research of the study would need to individualize differences in the relationships with celebrities to determine if these thoughts are psychological or developmental.

The limitations they had were that there was a significantly smaller number of boys than there were girls, they did not measure the adolescents' media usage, they restricted the individuals to same-gender celebrities even though some persisted in using one of the opposite sex, and some of the characteristics that were used have gendered-stereotyped connotations that affected the boys demographic. The overall conclusion of this study was that "while imagined social relationships are unlikely to supersede real ones in importance, they might play a significant role in social development" (Gleason et al., 2017).

### **Parasocial Relationships and Reality**

Parasocial relationships and social media have given people the outlet to find a connection with something. They become a way to escape from the world around us. However, these "one-sided" relationships can be draining to a person when they don't get the same feelings reciprocated to them. This type of non-interaction affects their mental health and makes them feel like they don't matter. It has been discovered that "[p]arasocial relationships may interfere with a person's real-life relationships or daily life, especially if they take the place of real-life interactions and relationships" (Martin, 2022, par. 10). It can cause a person to have anxiety, loneliness, and social isolation whenever it is associated with social media. It can also affect negative social comparisons, spending habits, links to materialism, and depression. However, parasocial relationships can significantly impact a person positively as well. Martin also discovered

that “people with avoidant attachment may be more likely to identify with TV characters who display positive, appealing characteristics such as autonomy and independence. They may try to embody these traits, which may be an effective coping strategy” (Martin, 2022, par. 7). They can include motivation, positive influence, life lessons, companionship, providing fulfillment, encouraging healthy behaviors, and reducing health-related stigma.

One of the main reasons why people seek connection to something is because our society is part of a lonely culture. People are longing for connections and it has gotten to the point where they prioritize fake relationships over making real ones. The term attachment anxiety can “hold negative self-perceptions and see themselves as unworthy of love and attention” (Bernhold, 2019). This attachment excessively relies on relationships with an individual and fears that they will be abandoned. However, parasocial relationships get rid of this idea since the other person does not know the individual exists, therefore they will never be abandoned. This also goes for a parasocial relationship with a fictional character. Parasocial relationships serve as a haven for complex dynamics within the real world. Parasocial relationships are consistent and predictable. In a lonely society longing for connections, these relationships allow a person to cope with the underlying fear of abandonment.

Parasocial relationships are commonly known as relationships between two people, however, this can also be the case for fake people as well. Due to the different forms of media, individuals are exposed to entertainment that spans multiple facets. One type of facet that will be focused on is fictional character parasocial relationships. This topic is more widely known within society today and can create unhealthy obsessions

among people. So far, research has been presented on what happens when a person has a parasocial relationship with a real person.

Within recent years, psychologists have begun to study a term called “shifting.” This is when an individual mentally shifts from their current reality to a fictional reality. Shifting realities began during the COVID-19 pandemic and “grew exponentially on several online social platforms such as Amino, Reddit, TikTok, YouTube, and Wattpad” (Somer et al., 2021). With reality shifting, video creators who participate describe it as an out-of-body experience to visit alternate universes. Imagine the process as if there are multiple “earths” or a “multiverse.” Earth 1 could be considered the present-day society, but Earth 2 could be a reality where the individual lives in the Harry Potter universe. Individuals who indulge in shifting write scripts of how they want their visit to a particular universe to go, or they could go through the process of shifting without writing a script and leave the scenario up to “fate.”

Reality shifting is also a part of daydreaming. Daydreaming is a common practice whenever a person involves themselves in fantasies. “When someone daydreams, their attention is often directed to episodic, ongoing, and stimulus-independent thoughts, which may emerge as an alternative stream of consciousness, “projecting” themselves into a certain visual scene as if it were happening at the moment” (Somer et al., 2021). Immersive daydreaming is more intense in a way that it involves more of a presence from the individual. Out of the different types of daydreaming, shifting is categorized as immersive daydreaming where it “often entails a highly complex and structured fantasy activity, with the creation of unrealistic scenarios, including the development of imagined characters” (Somer et al., 2021).

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This research is to help bring awareness to parasocial relationships and the multiple effects they can have on individuals. A qualitative meta-analysis of parasocial relationships has been conducted to further research the implications they have on society and individuals. By examining previous research on these relationships, it can be found that there are common effects that have led to society turning away from interpersonal connections and relying on parasocial ones. The meta-analysis also highlights the need for media literacy and fosters awareness and responsibility with media content.

Parasocial relationships are not bad attachments, but if an individual becomes dependent on them, it can have negative consequences. Understanding the dynamics will help with reflection as an individual but also as a whole society with how it uses media. Modern media consumption has produced a lot of good progress in the world but has also gained a lot of toxicity with the amount of media individuals consume every day. The research presented shows the importance of boundaries that must be set between parasocial and interpersonal relationships.

Research was conducted by viewing scholarly articles pertaining to the history of parasocial relationships and media. Articles also contained information on attachment theory, celebrity fascinations, and fan relationships. Additionally, articles were found to give historical context to certain public figures such as Taylor Swift, Princess Diana, and

Marilyn Monroe. By pursuing these avenues, the qualitative meta-analysis on parasocial relationships has shown the influence of media culture and enhanced the psychological effects that have been overlooked.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The research conducted throughout this report was strictly a qualitative study of parasocial relationships and a look into the mental health aspects of the different facets of these relationships. Parasocial relationships have become more prominent within the last five years, but as it has been discovered, they have existed long before. The research not only delves into the mental health aspects but the historical context of the relationships as well. The questions asked at the beginning of the research were:

**Research Question 1:** “What roles do media platforms play in the intensity of parasocial relationships and how does that affect the different aspects of mental health?”

**Research Question 2:** “What historically has been shown to affect parasocial relationships?”

It was discovered that media platforms have a huge role in promoting parasocial relationships due to the extensive amount of media consumed by an individual. It was previously noted that “[transforming] the media landscape by providing individuals with the technical capability to compete with mass media in disseminating information, setting agendas, and framing conversations... [d]espite the promise offered by what social media makes technically possible, there is the matter of the socio-technical systems that emerge and evolve around these capabilities.” (Lin et al., 2014). Even though Hoffner stated that

parasocial relationships could promote healthy behaviors, he also made sure to note that they “may adversely impact mental health through negative self-comparisons” (Hoffner, 2008). History shows that the evolution of media created a gateway for society to know more about public figures in a way that it didn’t before. The results found that “when [an individual’s] idol shares personal parts of their lives as it allows them to feel a deeper connection” (Zafina & Sinha, 2024). Humans continue to form connections with public figures due to “all their characteristics and actions, is being presented to you on a regular basis via newspapers and TV screens, it becomes increasingly hard *not* to have some form of emotional reaction to them, good or bad” (Burnett, 2022).

By studying social media and the attention economy, media platforms play a major role in the intensity of parasocial relationships. Constant exposure to media has allowed individuals to maintain a glimpse into the personal lives of public figures. A recent article on Forbes Health gives various causes of parasocial relationships such as social-emotional needs, escapism, media exposure, and perceived friendships. The article notes that parasocial relationships can be used for comfort, but doesn’t come without risks. An emotional attachment to a public figure can lead to disappointment whenever that person does something differently than the personality they project to the public. They also “hold an individual back from forming authentic relationships with people in their daily lives” (Duszynski-Goodman & Spann, 2023). Even though research has shown that these relationships can have a positive effect on individuals, a majority of the research shows that parasocial relationships have the ability to cause more harm to a person’s mental health than good.

Since movies and television shows were created, parasocial relationships took form. Obsession with public figures grew in the media and average homes in the mid-1900s. Take, for example, Marilyn Monroe. Similar to the media's fascination with Princess Diana, "Marilyn Monroe was a walking talking symbol of the fleetingness of beauty, and youth" (Taylor, 2022). The media and public fell in love with her and could not get enough. Even today, individuals are still obsessed with the fascination of her beauty, acting career, fashion, and overall life story, even if it came to a tragic end. Taylor notes that "[i]t isn't that Marilyn was ever unpopular, but arguably since her death she hasn't been unpopular a single day" (Taylor, 2022). To answer the question at hand, what has historically been shown to affect parasocial relationships is media exposure of public figures and other facets that contribute to parasocial relationships.

Limitations to this research show that there needs to be more quantitative studies on parasocial relationships. Due to the time frame given for this research, it was not possible to conduct a quantitative analysis of this magnitude. This research deserves more exploration of quantitative studies to further prove what the qualitative meta-analysis could not. While this research did prove that media consumption is a main cause of parasocial relationships, future research could show the amount of time an individual spends on a form of media stemmed from their parasocial relationships. It could also lead to implementing more strategies that could help with media literacy, coping mechanisms, and regulation of parasocial relationships.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

Throughout this report, the different aspects of parasocial relationships have been discussed, and how they also tie into attachment theory, media ecology, the attention economy, and mental health. These all work together to create the media-controlled society of present-day living. By studying the attention economy, our economy will continue to create media content that either helps or hinders us as humans. These problems affect our mental health, communication with others, and overall our way of life. With the constant media in our faces all the time, it eventually comes down to the individual and whether they want to change their way of media consumption or not. From what studies have shown, the way to help this is by developing the willpower and motivation to not give in to the pressures of the media.

Parasocial relationships cause people to look for a way to escape the reality they are living in. As this research has shown, this can be detrimental to their mental health. Of course, parasocial relationships create an escape from our current reality, but these relationships are only temporary. They allow individuals to rely on a fake scenario and leave them unable to deal with their underlying issues. The overall solution found from this research is that individuals must have a sense of self-awareness when forming parasocial relationships. Society can take action with media literacy programs and open discussions to help individuals feel more comfortable sharing their obsessions.

Recognizing the potential effects that media can have on a person is vital in preserving a healthier and balanced media landscape.

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