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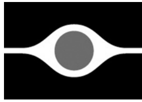
REBECCA TUKACHINSKY FORSTER

The Oxford Handbook *of* PARASOCIAL EXPERIENCES

The Oxford Handbook of Parasocial Experiences



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Introduction: A Look Forward on Parasocial Experience Research

Rebecca Tukachinsky Forster

Abstract

This handbook discusses the psychological aspects of parasocial experiences (PSEs), including parasocial relationships (PSRs) (i.e., the illusion of intimacy with media personae), and parasocial interactions (PSIs), which entails a sense of a give and take with the media figure. While the handbook is organized such that each chapter tackles a different area of PSE research, there are several overarching questions that the book addresses: What qualifies as a parasocial (vs. social) experience? How do PSEs differ from other forms of media involvement? Are there multiple, qualitatively different, types of PSEs? And are these experiences state or trait-like qualities? Consideration of these questions has implications for both theory and methodology.

Key Words: parasocial interactions, parasocial relationships, fandom, involvement, social relationships, methodology

Introduction

Scientific jargon rarely escapes the ivory tower to become a pop culture buzzword. Nonetheless, this is what has happened recently to the terms *parasocial relationships* (PSRs) and *parasocial interactions* (PSIs) that Horton and Wohl coined in their 1956 paper in reference to the imaginary, one-sided engagement of audiences with media personalities. After lying in obscurity for several decades, scientific investigation of these phenomena has proliferated (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). A wealth of research demonstrates that PSRs are ubiquitous across media genres, platforms, and contexts and have profound effects on media users across various domains. These include persuasion effects in marketing, public health, and politics (for meta-analysis, see Tukachinsky et al., 2020), as well as effects on media users' self-identity and emotional well-being (for review, see Hartmann, 2017).

However, remarkably, by 2020, the term "parasocial" also penetrated the cultural discourse, making common appearances in articles in mainstream news outlets, such as *USA Today* and *Wall Street Journal* (Brisc, 2021; Gamerman, 2020) and frequenting popular culture websites like Hollywood Insider (e.g., Adamec, 2021). Twitter analytics estimated that in January 2022 hundreds of tweets mentioned the words "parasocial relationship."

This demonstrates the social significance and relevance of this research area beyond the academic realms as well as the urgency with which the scientific community should catch up with understanding the richness of parasocial phenomena. This is particularly tricky as media users' experiences morph in a dynamic media environment as new media formats and platforms rapidly evolve, offering new ways for audiences to relate to media personalities. Some of these developments have profound implication for theorization, by challenging what initially appeared to be a straightforward conceptualization of the term "parasocial." Other technological advances provoke new questions or call for reexamination of previously studied questions.

About This Handbook

What Do We Mean by Parasocial Experiences?

This handbook approaches parasocial phenomena from a psychological perspective—as a subjective, personal *experience* of engaging in an interaction or a relationship with media figures. Thus, throughout this book, parasocial experience (PSE) is used to refer to both PSI and PSR. It is important to note that this use of the term parasocial experience broadens Hartmann and Goldhoorn's (2011) earlier use of this term, which was limited only to PSI experiences. In other words, while the initial term parasocial experience was specifically reserved to refer to media users' psychological PSI, in this book, PSEs connote the psychological aspects of all parasocial phenomena.

How Is the Book Organized?

The handbook offers a thorough synthesis of this fast-growing, international, and multidisciplinary research area, not only celebrating the field's accomplishments to date but also outlining the blueprint for future growth. It is organized in six parts. Part I presents conceptual and operational definitions of several types of PSEs. Chapter 1 offers a historical overview of the field, outlines the scope and breadth of this body of research, and demonstrates how far the field has evolved. The chapter stresses developing an increasingly nuanced conceptualization of PSEs and the growing methodological sophistication. The next two chapters (Chapter 2 and Chapter 3) draw distinctions between PSIs, parasocial attachment (PSA), different forms of PSRs (e.g., romantic PSRs, nonamicable PSRs), and other related phenomena (e.g., character identification, fandom). Chapter 2 in particular focuses on specific challenges to the conceptualization of PSI. Building on the theoretical foundations outlined in the first chapters, Chapter 4 provides an in-depth overview of the methodological considerations in the field of parasocial research, including both measurement and experimental manipulation of PSRs and PSIs. Part II examines PSRs as a process. Chapter 5 discusses how PSRs are initiated and maintained. Chapter 6 discusses relational challenges and relationship termination, identifying ways in which relationships come to an end and how media users cope with PSR loss. Part III examines PSRs across the life span, discussing the unique functions, effects, and processes associated with PSRs

at every age group from a developmental perspective, including children (Chapter 7), adolescents (Chapter 8), and adults (Chapter 9).

The following sections of the book discuss particular aspects of PSEs. Part IV focuses on the effects of PSRs on self (e.g., identity [Chapter 11, Chapter 13]) and social life (e.g., loneliness, intergroup relationships [Chapter 10, Chapter 12]). Part V is devoted to a deep exploration of applications of PSRs to specific contexts, including health (Chapter 14), politics (Chapter 15), and marketing (Chapter 16). Following the synthesis of existing scholarship in the field, the book outlines directions for future research.

Part V concludes the book with three chapters, each of which explores a research area that has been understudied and calls for further investigation. Bringing together evidence from research in related fields, these insights are synthesized in the concluding section of the book into an updated research agenda on nonamicable PSRs (Chapter 17), racial and ethnic identity (Chapter 18), and comparative international research (Chapter 19).

In all, the handbook offers more than state-of-art reviews of the literature (although it does do that as well). Rather, leading scholars on PSEs provide their insights into some of the most critical theoretical questions that face the field today. The key points brought up throughout the chapters are outlined in the following section.

Conceptual Questions

This section outlines some of the questions that the field grapples with and are brought up throughout this book.

Parasocial Versus Social Experience

Across many of the chapters, the book grapples with of the fundamental conceptualization question that has haunted parasocial researchers for decades: What is parasocial, and what is not? Does a student sitting in the back row of an auditorium with 300 other students develop a PSR with the professor, whom she never meets outside the lecture hall? Would the answer to this question differ if the auditorium's capacity was only 100 students or if the student sat in the first row? And what distinguishes parasocial interactions from social presence, human–computer interaction, or computer-mediated communication? Does one of the 5,000 followers of a micro-influencer engage in a PSI when posting a comment on the influencer's page? Is it no longer a PSI if the influencer "likes" the comment or responds to it in his next video post? And what about human–computer interaction versus PSI? Is talking to a voice assistant powered by artificial intelligence (AI) considered to be parasocial even though Siri is eager to respond? And if the individual develops emotional attachment to Siri and finds her voice soothing and encouraging, can the individual be said to be in a PSR with her?

As Nicole Liebers, Holger Schramm, and David Giles review in the opening chapters (Chapter 1 and Chapter 2), the breadth of applications of the concept parasocial is astonishing, moving from its original reference to watching a "real" persona on television

(e.g., a news anchor) to spectating actors (in person) in theater; reading about fictional characters in novels; watching live streamers on social media; and even relating brands and websites as a whole. Is applying the term parasocial to all or just some of these situations too much of a stretch?

Not surprisingly, for the most part, the authors refuse to draw rigid categories and classify every instance as either parasocial or social. Attempts to do so would be futile and lack validity, David Giles argues in Chapter 2. He makes the argument that parasocial and social relationships are not binary experiences. Rather, parasocial elements are embedded in certain social contexts and vice versa. A different crossover between social and parasocial is pointed by Tilo Hartmann (Chapter 3) in distinguishing between mediated social interactions and PSIs. He argues that the same media exposure can be experienced as either parasocial or mediated social interaction. Sorting these experiences into definitive boxes is a Sisyphean undertaking because the fast-evolving, ever-changing technologies and the constant development of new affordances outpace the media scholars' efforts to theorize these phenomena. These technological shifts continue to impose new challenges even to the most fundamental propositions that appeared to be commonsensical or self-evident at first. Thus, rather than offering simple and satisfying answers (that will become obsolete with each new media use trend or a technological development), the authors offer a different set of questions—a diagnostic kit that scholars can use in contemplating their subject of study. The key for the future of PSE research lies, therefore, in shifting attention away from particular platforms (Twitch, Twitter, etc.) and instead theorizing the effects of each type of media affordances.

PSR Versus Liking/Trust/Identification/Worship/Fandom

Even when a given situation can be defined as parasocial (or having a potential for a PSE), questions arise regarding the extent that existing researchers have correctly identified, theorized, and measured this construct. For instance, what is the difference (and the relationship) between having a PSR with a media figure and being that media figure's fan?[1] Jonathan Cohen (2014) stressed that PSRs are based on intimacy—a sense of a personal, friendship-like bond with a "natural, down to earth person" (as stated in PSI/PSR measures; Rubin et al., 1985). Conversely, Cohen maintained, fandom is a form of admiration from afar of an unobtainable idol. Thus, PSRs and fandom are two distinct theoretical constructs representing different modes of media user involvement with media personalities.

Contrary to Jonathan Cohen's theorization, David Giles (Chapter 2) and Gayle Stever (Chapter 9) define fandom in terms of the media user's behavioral and emotional involvement with the media and the labor they invest in it. Hence, being a fan of a particular media figure is a specific type of fandom that overlaps with PSRs. The parasocial relational model articulated by Tukachinsky and Stever (2019) posited that PSRs

slowly develop from initiation, morphing into deeper, more meaningful relationships that, for some people, escalate to fandom (see Chapter 5 for review). In other words, PSRs can encompass a spectrum of experiences only some of which rise to the level of fandom. Accordingly, from one perspective (represented by Cohen, 2014), PSRs and fandom of media figures (in their purest, theoretical form) are completely distinct and even mutually exclusive. Fandom of a media figure is based on a sense of distance, while PSRs are an experience of intimacy. From the second perspective (e.g., Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019), however, the two constructs inherently overlap, with one being a subset of the other.

Researchers also struggle with theorizing and empirically capturing the unique role of PSRs in various theories of media uses and effects relative to other forms of involvement with and responses to media personalities. How do PSRs fit within the bigger puzzle of involvement with media characters? For instance, how do PSRs operate alongside feelings of trust in the context of political influence (Chapter 15) and marketing (Chapter 16)? How are PSRs conceptually different, yet related to liking, for example, when considering the effect of media on viewers' self-esteem (Chapter 11)?

Answering these questions based on the existing literature can get tricky at times. Elizabeth Cohen and Anita Atwell Seate (Chapter 12) maintain that the lion's share of work on parasocial contact is, as a matter of fact, not tapping into PSEs at all. A similar issue is identified by Dara Greenwood and Alice Aldoukhov (Chapter 10); Shira Gabriel, Ariana F. Young, Esha Naidu, and Veronica Schneider (Chapter 11); and Julius Riles and Kelly Adams (Chapter 18). These authors poignantly note a gap between the theories that they review (which make propositions concerning PSEs) and the measures and manipulations that the empirical studies employ (which capture other, adjacent, constructs such as liking, similarity, and wishful identification). Facing a similar dilemma in reviewing the literature on relational challenges and parasocial breakup (PSB), Mu Hu (Chapter 6) decided to employ the opposite approach. Unlike some of the other contributors to this book, he resolved to limit himself to studies that specifically measure PSRs, excluding studies that measured other, related, albeit different concepts. This dilemma reflects a bigger struggle within the field to define the scope and boundaries of PSEs and their need to be defined against other media involvement phenomena.

Qualitatively Different Types of PSRs Versus PSR Intensity

Gaps between theoretical assertions and methodological practices are most notable in the context of PSR development and nonamicable PSRs. It appears that researchers tend to reduce PSRs to a monolithic construct that only varies in its intensity. For many researchers, PSRs range from dislike to neutral feelings, to strong affinity for the character. Accordingly, PSRs can be operationalized as high versus low scores on a single scale.

Individuals who dislike a character or who did not have a chance to develop a PSR with the character yet would score low on that scale. As the relationship grows, so does the rating on that scale.

However, this may be an oversimplification for a number of reasons. First, it overlooks the nuance of development of the PSR. Nathan Walter, Emily Andrews, and I (Chapter 5) observe that, for decades, PSRs have been only studied using cross-sectional survey designs. These studies have offered a snapshot of people's preexisting relationships with a given media personality (e.g., Rubin & Step, 2000). Later experimental studies attempted to examine PSRs in isolation from the broader context of media exposure (e.g., Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016). Neither approach offers an understanding of how PSRs actually operate, evolving over time, through repeated exposure to the media personality and imaginary interactions that media users can have with the media personae in between these media exposure sessions. Recently, we have seen an uptake in longitudinal research on PSRs that offers much overdue empirical data on how PSRs change over time (Bond, 2021; Siegenthaler et al., 2021). However, some of these studies' results are inconsistent with current theoretical models (Siegenthaler et al., 2021). Due to the scarcity of such longitudinal research, it is still premature to conclude if this is a fluke—results idiosyncratic to a particular media message. An alternative explanation for these findings is that they are an artifact of insufficient measurement sensitivity. It is possible that rather than examining *intensity* of PSRs, scholars should shift their attention to the unique characteristics that comprise each stage of PSRs as it evolves (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019; see Chapter 5 this volume).

Second, the predominant approach to PSRs as intensity on a unidimensional scale reflects a narrow view of PSRs as amicable bonds with liked characters. However, in the past decade it has been observed that media users can also have combative relationships with characters they dislike (e.g., Bernhold, 2019). For instance, individuals can become disappointed in a media figure that morally transgresses (Hu, 2016), or view a media figure as their romantic rival, competing for the love of their celebrity crush (Tukachinsky Forster, 2022). While there is a paucity of research on this aspect of PSEs, it appears that many scholars consider them as low-intensity PSRs. The development of the antipathy scale (Hartmann et al., 2008) made an important stride toward conceptualizing PSRs as not always friendly. Although this makes an important step in the right direction, this approach was still lacking nuance as it constrained PSRs into two groups: positive versus negative PSRs with liked versus disliked characters, respectively. Neither of these parsimonious approaches (PSR as a continuum of intensity or as a binary positive/negative PSR) acknowledges the diversity of PSEs. Building on theories and research of (anti)fandom, Melissa Click and I (Chapter 17) propose a novel typology of various PSRs that encompass a range of more complex, at times negative, or ambivalent PSEs. We then identify the hypothesized predictors of each type of these PSRs with the hope that future research will put these assertions to an empirical test.

PSRs: Trait or State?

To what extent do individuals vary in their propensity for PSEs? Are some people more prone to developing PSRs than others? My own research, specifically on romantic PSRs, showed that, depending on the sample, two out of three or four out of five individuals have had such an experience at least once (Tukachinsky Forster, 2021). Of those who had a romantic PSR, over half reported having such experience multiple times. This means that there is a large group of people who are inclined to have serial parasocial romantic relationships, but there is also a sizable group of people who never have them. Similarly, looking at general PSRs, when individuals are asked to rate their PSRs toward their favorite media figure, scores distribute normally, displaying substantial variability. Why? Why do some people repeatedly form PSRs and experience profound PSEs while others are less likely to bond with media personalities? What distinguishes between those who tend to form PSRs and those who do not? Does the likelihood of developing PSRs depend mostly on situational factors or on the relatively stable personality characteristics?

Most research on individual differences in PSRs considered them as a way to fulfill various social and emotional psychological needs that may be more prevalent among some media users. For instance, scholars have theorized that individual variations in PSR intensity can be predicted by psychological motivational variables such as loneliness, insecure attachment, need to belong, and identification with a marginalized social group (Chapter 10, Chapter 13, and Chapter 18 in this volume review these theories and research). Building on this tradition of a deficiency model (also known as the compensation, or social surrogacy, model), PSR researchers have focused on personality predictors such as extraversion and emotional stability (Ingram & Luckett, 2019; Schramm & Wirth, 2010; Sun & Wu, 2012; Tsao, 1996). However, without undermining the importance of these social functions of PSEs, it would be helpful to consider other classes of individual differences that may contribute to media users' susceptibility for developing PSEs.

For example, Bilandzic et al. (2019) developed a comprehensive, multidimensional construct of narrative engageability. This personality trait encompasses propensity for (a) feeling present in the fictional world; (b) being emotionally reactive; (c) experiencing suspense and curiosity; and (d) ease of accepting unrealism. The scale overall, and the first three of these subscales, in turn have been significantly associated with other individual characteristics known to predict media involvement: need for affect, trait empathy, and trait sympathy. Unfortunately, PSEs were not included in this study.

Slater et al. (2018) made the first step toward developing the parasocial equivalent of transportability. They asked individuals to reflect on their PSRs with actors and characters in general rather than in relation to a particular media figure (see Chapter 4, Box 4.13 for the scale description and items). These general PSRs were positively associated with transportability, media consumption for self-expansion, and the tendency to continue psychologically engaging with the media content after the media exposure. It remains to be seen how the propensity for engaging in PSRs and experiencing PSIs is correlated

with other personality characteristics. Some interesting candidates emerged from several recent studies on situational PSRs in a particular media context. For example, Brodie and Ingram (2021) found an association between PSRs with comic book characters and narcissistic personality, whereas Liebers and Straub (2020) found a link between a general tendency to fantasize and romantic PSRs among romance novel readers. It is important, however, to probe these types of effects further to better understand whether these are content/genre/encounter specific or whether propensity for fantasy and daydreaming, as a stable personality trait, constitutes one of the fundamental building blocks of PSEs. Furthermore, moving beyond micro-level individual variations, Mu Hu and I (Chapter 19) consider bigger cultural differences that can play a role in PSEs. Here, we argue it is important to not only consider psychological cultural characteristics (e.g., collectivistic vs. individualistic orientation) but also take into account the broader situational cultural context within which PSEs occur (e.g., production and distribution practices, societal media consumption norms).

Strangely, while there were at least some attempts to identify individual differences in propensity for PSR and its correlates, I am not aware of research that does the same for PSI. It therefore remains unknown to what extent media users vary in their inclination to experience PSIs while consuming media. What factors contribute to such differences? To what extent does the list of predictors of the disposition for engaging in PSIs overlap with the list of predictors of experiencing PSRs? Further research on general PSRs as well as PSIs is due to illuminate these important questions.

Operationalization: Measurement and Manipulation of PSIs and PSRs

The conceptual questions discussed in the previous section also highlight the importance of operationalization of PSEs to match the theoretical propositions. Jayson Dibble, Maddie Guzaitis, Sarah Downey, and I strove to add clarity to methodological ambiguities in the field and assist researchers in their future work. To this end, Chapter 4 lists 21 measures of PSEs, including PSR, PSI, and PSB, in various contexts, ranging from very general to specific (e.g., PSRs with political figures, children's PSIs, or romantic PSRs). We discuss the validity and reliability of each scale, review studies that used them, and reproduce each scale verbatim, making it easier for researchers to choose the most appropriate measure for the research questions at hand.

Another important question that Elizabeth Cohen and Anita Seate (Chapter 12) ponder is whether some media messages used in parasocial contact research could generate sufficiently powerful PSEs. This question ties into a bigger question of parasociability as a trait of the individuals consuming not only media but also the media content itself. What message characteristics (in terms of length, vividness, detail, etc.) are sufficient for developing measurable levels of PSR? What amount and quality of exposure re needed for producing PSR-related effects, such as persuasion or modeling (e.g., in parasocial contact or marketing contexts)? Nathan Walter, Emily Andrews and

I (Chapter 5) grapple with these questions as we try to reconcile the inconsistent findings in longitudinal PSRs research that use different types of media content and vary the amount of exposure from 4 days to 10 weeks. Not only are these questions important from a theoretical standpoint, but they also have serious implications for experimental research design.

In Chapter 3, Tilo Hartmann lays crucial conceptual groundwork for identifying the important components of PSI manipulation. Chapter 4 uses meta-analytical evidence of the effectiveness of experimental manipulations of PSI that incorporate some of these message and platform variables. However, manipulation of PSRs remains scarce. As Nathan Walter, Emily Andrews, and I discuss in Chapter 5, there are still very limited data on how quickly PSRs evolve in response to specific media characteristics. Against this backdrop, the implication of Elizabeth Cohen and Anita Seate's ideas (Chapter 12) regarding message characteristics that elicit PSRs extends beyond parasocial contact research. In Chapter 5, Jayson Dibble, Maddie Guzaitis, Sarah Downey, and I discuss a novel, imaginative method that could be used for PSR elicitation. It is my hope that researchers will be compelled to put these theoretical propositions to an empirical test and advance the field into an era of more valid and precise experimental designs.

To conclude, parasocial research is exploding. This book offers readers an opportunity to reflect on this vast body of research and reflect on the path forward, further advancing theorization of PSEs, as well as addressing some gaps left in the existing literature. My hope is that the comprehensive literature review and the thought-provoking questions posed by the contributors to this book will spark further research and greater understanding of these fascinating phenomena.

Note

1. Fandom can also refer to media texts more broadly (e.g., being a fan of *Star Trek* or of a sports team but neither relating to nor idolizing any particular actor/character/player). The discussion here, however, focuses specifically on fandom and PSRs with individuals. PSRs also are viewed here as an audience's connection with a media figure. However, this term has been extended to apply to anthropomorphized entities, such as PSRs with brands, as discussed further in this chapter and in Chapter 2.

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PART I

Ontology and Epistemology of Parasocial Experiences

CHAPTER

1

The History and Scope of Parasocial Research

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Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of the evolution of parasocial research. To begin, the origin of parasocial research in the 1950s is described, followed by milestones in the development of theoretical perspectives on parasocial experiences. In the next step, the growing interest in empirical research concerning parasocial experiences is explained. After explaining the development and milestones of parasocial research, the chapter takes a look at today's scope of parasocial research by addressing its diversification and current research trends. In doing so, this chapter offers meaningful insights into parasocial research from a meta-perspective and, in turn, can be seen as a kind of foundation for the following chapters of this handbook.

Key Words: parasocial relationships, parasocial interactions, history, theory, methods, measurement

The Origin of Parasocial Research

With the growing popularity of television within the population in the 1950s, two American scientists, Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, made an observation whose wide-ranging impact on the scientific community they could not have guessed at this time. They noticed that despite the fact that media characters (e.g., show hosts) in television and radio address a mass audience, viewers/listeners experience a feeling of intimacy. They explained this feeling of intimacy by the illusion of face-to-face communication between the media personalities and the audience, with one example being a host that directly looks in the camera and welcomes her/his audience at home by saying: "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen!" It is this observation that motivated Horton and Wohl to write the article, "Mass Communication and Parasocial Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance" (1956), which first gave the mediated illusion of face-to-face communication its still prominent name: parasocial interaction (PSI). Many of the first thoughts on parasocial experiences that Horton and Wohl captured in their article maintain great relevance until the present day and are presented in this chapter.

One of the most important assumptions by Horton and Wohl (1956) concerns the similarity between parasocial and real-life interactions. Besides the critical difference that a PSI is not reciprocal, the authors assumed that it is more the intensity than certain attributes (e.g., effort or conscientiousness) that make the difference between parasocial and real-life interactions. Reflecting on this reality, Horton and Wohl (1956) assumed, among others, that, analogously to real-life interactions and relationships, PSIs with a media personality can manifest in an overarching relationship with the media personality, which we call a parasocial relationship (PSR).

The consequences and gratifications of parasocial experiences for viewers/listeners are another aspect that Horton and Wohl (1956) addressed in their article. In doing so, they assumed that PSIs can evoke the feeling of companionship in individuals, which might be beneficial for these individuals' well-being. Moreover, they emphasized the possibility for the media user to be whomever he/she wants to be within the interaction with the media personality. Besides the possibility to embody one's ideal, Horton and Wohl (1956) assumed that parasocial experiences also provide the chance to communicate with individuals that are not part of the viewer's or the listener's social environment in real life. This includes individuals with another origin, different social status, or other sexual orientations, just to name a few examples. Due to interacting with individuals who are not part of one's real-life social environment, a media user can broaden their horizon and learn about social intercourse with individuals who are not part of their daily life.

Furthermore, Horton and Wohl (1956) raised the question if parasocial experiences should be seen as an everyday phenomenon or a pathological phenomenon. In this context, they investigated statements and behaviors of several fans of the television spot *Count Sheep* (a program in which viewers could watch the attractive Nancy Berg putting herself to sleep) and the radio broadcast *The Lonesome Gal* (a radio show in which Jean King held monologs about her [love] life and wishes with a lascivious voice). Both broadcasts provide the chance to immerse oneself in the everyday world of two attractive women and, in doing so, foster the PSI with them. Both broadcasts had a strong fan base at the time, ranging from individuals who regularly watched/listened to the shows to individuals who actually made approaches to the show hosts, such as wedding proposals to *The Lonesome Gal* (Moss & Higgins, 1984). These very intense parasocial experiences, which, among others, included romantic feelings toward the show hosts, were classified as extreme forms of parasocial experiences by Horton and Wohl (1956). However, at the same time, the authors emphasized that it is reasonable for lonely individuals to search for contact and attachment with media personalities besides real-life contact. Horton and Wohl (1956) explained that a parasocial experience is not pathological as long as it is not a replacement for one's own social life and, in turn, the escapism of the real world.

The potential consequences and, in part, strong bonding between media personalities and the audience also harbor advantages for the media industry, assumed Horton and

Wohl (1956). In this context, the authors presented several ways of how media personalities can foster the development of PSIs with them, such as addressing the audience or demonstrating intimacy with other individuals at their show. Horton and Wohl (1956) further assumed that the media industry knew about these methods, used them to create meaningful bonding, and, in turn, took advantage of the parasocial bonding by enhancing ratings and selling products that the media personalities had promoted. As a result, Horton and Wohl (1956) attributed an active role to the audience and quit with the perspective of the former decades that attributed media users a passive role.

Briefly summarized, Horton and Wohl (1956) not only gave parasocial experiences their name but also introduced critical perspectives on parasocial experiences that are still relevant in parasocial research until the present day. Of the numerous articles we could name that base their research on Horton and Wohl's (1956) ideas, let us only present a few examples: The illusion of face-to-face communication, which can be, among others, achieved through direct addressing of the audience, is still seen as a major element of PSIs (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; see also Chapter 3). Current theoretical models kept the assumption that PSIs manifest in overarching (parasocial) relationships between media personalities and media users (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019; see also Chapter 2 and Chapter 5). Several empirical studies have already found evidence that parasocial experiences can enhance the knowledge of people with whom one has no contact in real life and, in doing so, help to decrease prejudices and stereotypical views (Schiappa et al., 2006; see also Chapter 12). The enhancement of persuasive effectiveness and the advantages for the media industry due to parasocial experiences is one of the most researched topics within parasocial research (Breves, Amrehn, et al., 2021; see also Chapter 16).

In conclusion, Horton and Wohl could not have guessed the impact of their article and that it would be the foundation for numerous theoretical and empirical investigations. This is particularly tragic, as it did not in the next decades come to Wohl's attention due to his early death in 1957 (Strauss, 1958). However, the death of Wohl did not prevent the concept of parasocial experiences from evolving. How parasocial research further developed in the following 65 years after the introduction by Horton and Wohl (1956) is described in the next sections.

Milestones in Developing Theoretical Perspectives on Parasocial Experiences

Parasocial experiences caught the attention of numerous scientists, leading to a vast amount of empirical studies on the phenomenon (which we address in the next section); however, with regard to theoretical perspectives, the concept of parasocial experiences is often said to be undertheorized (e.g., Giles, 2002; Schiappa et al., 2006; Wu et al., 2018). Although this criticism is reasonable by just comparing the number of theoretical versus empirical articles on parasocial experiences, there are still a considerable number of theoretical perspectives on the phenomenon. In this section, we describe milestones in the

development of theoretical perspectives and how they shaped the current understanding of parasocial experiences.

Differentiation Between Parasocial Interactions and Relationships

One of the most important theoretical advances within parasocial research is the differentiation between PSIs (i.e., mediated interactions during media consumption) and PSRs (i.e., overarching relationships that are not limited to media consumption) (see Chapters 2 and 3 for more nuanced definitions of PSIs and PSRs). Especially in the beginning of parasocial research, different definitions and usages of the terms PSI and PSR existed that led to not only a broad understanding of the constructs but also ambiguity (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). This partly resulted in a definitional equation of the labels PSI and PSR, and they have often been used as if they were exchangeable (e.g., A. M. Rubin et al., 1985; Sherman-Morris, 2005). However, it is important to clearly differentiate between PSIs and PSRs as previous research found evidence that not only are the two concepts distinct but also they might operate differently (e.g., Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016). Thus, the missing differentiation between the concepts is problematic, and it further complicates the understanding of current research states for the specific forms of parasocial experiences. Reflecting on this reality, the authors and works that addressed this issue and attended to the differentiation of the constructs PSI and PSR in their work are so important. However, it must be noted that in the majority of cases, it was not the (missing) differentiation itself that motivated the authors to address distinct definitions but their willingness to model the development of parasocial experiences and, as a consequence thereof, the need to make distinctions.

One of the first to explicitly differentiate between the concepts was the German scientist Uli Gleich (1997) in his dissertation, in which he assumed that PSIs and PSRs are distinct concepts that influence each other mutually. On a similar note, Hartmann et al. (2004) needed to clearly define PSI as a specific form of involvement during media reception to develop their two-level model of PSIs (for a summary in English, see Klimmt et al., 2006). Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) added up to this by emphasizing the aspect of the illusionary face-to-face communication in PSIs, which further differentiated the concept from PSRs. Moreover, the work of Dibble et al. (2016) should be named at this point, as they found evidence that the widely used PSI-Scale by A. M. Rubin et al. (1985) (see more in the section "The Development of Measurement Tools to Capture Parasocial Experiences") is actually more suitable to measure PSRs than PSIs. To conclude, the listed works and authors are only a few important examples because going into more details would go beyond the scope of this chapter; there is, of course, more research that more or less explicitly addressed the differences between PSIs and PSRs (e.g., Liebers & Straub, 2020; Schramm, 2008; Stever, 2017; Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016).

Nowadays, the majority of research differentiates between PSIs and PSRs and, in doing so, follows the current research community's understanding of the concepts. However, it

is in the nature of science that subsequent articles use previous existing research as the basis for their writing, and if the referenced research used an ambiguous definition of the parasocial experiences—such as the PSI-Scale by A. M. Rubin et al. (1985)—this mistake is often carried over. This is particularly problematic for research that originally comes from other disciplines and is not focused on parasocial experiences but "only" includes a parasocial phenomenon additionally and therefore has not the full overview on the current understanding of parasocial experiences.

The Introduction of Other Forms of Parasocial Experiences Besides Friendship

The vast majority of parasocial research understands parasocial experiences as friendship-like interactions and relationships between media personalities and media users (e.g., Auter & Moore, 1993; Bond, 2016; Eyal & Cohen, 2006). However, one of the key assumptions within parasocial research is that parasocial experiences are very similar to real-life interactions and relationships between two individuals (e.g., Liebers & Schramm, 2022). Reflecting on the reality that in real life there are more facets of interactions and relationships than friendship, several authors extended the understanding of parasocial experiences beyond amicable bonding. Briefly summarized, there are two other facets of parasocial experiences that were established: negative parasocial experiences (i.e., feeling antipathy for a media personality) and romantic parasocial experiences (i.e., feeling romantic attraction toward a media personality) (see Chapter 2 for more details on different facets of parasocial experiences).

Surprisingly, the investigation of parasocial experiences beyond friendship is a relatively new research focus (Liebers & Schramm, 2019, and Chapter 17). With regard to negative parasocial experiences, Hartmann et al. (2008) reported the first empirical study on negative PSRs in the context of racing sport. Tian and Hoffner (2010) extended this line of research by comparing PSIs with liked, neutral, and disliked TV characters; this extension was followed by Dibble and Rosaen (2011), who also investigated PSIs with disliked media personalities. Although a few other studies followed this direction (e.g., Rosaen & Dibble, 2016), this focus is still uncommon within parasocial research.

With regard to romantic parasocial experiences, there was sporadic research on romantic feelings in parasocial experiences (e.g., McCourt & Fitzpatrick, 2001). However, the international "breakthrough" of the research focus was made by Tukachinsky (2010) as her article not only introduced theoretical background on romantic parasocial experiences but also offered a measurement tool to capture romantic PSRs. Adam and Sizemore (2013) added up to this by exploring the costs and benefits of parasocial versus real-life romantic relationships. Since then, several authors have followed this research interest and provided new theoretical contributions (e.g., Erickson et al., 2018) and empirical research (e.g., Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018; Liebers, 2022; Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018; Chapter 8 this volume) on romantic parasocial experiences.

The Development of Measurement Tools to Capture Parasocial Experiences

As (quantitative) empirical studies rate high within parasocial research, developing tools to measure parasocial experiences has been one of the major milestones in the development of the research field since the beginning. In the following, we introduce the most influential measurement tools that have been developed since the introduction of parasocial experiences by Horton and Wohl (1956).

The first measurement tool to capture parasocial experiences was introduced by Rosengren et al. (1976). However, it was not used in many studies as shortly after its introduction (as measured by published empirical studies on parasocial experiences at that time), it made way for the already mentioned PSI-Scale by A. M. Rubin et al. (1985) and its short version by A. M. Rubin and Perse (1987). The authors originally developed the PSI-Scale to capture parasocial experiences with local television newscasters, but ever since then the tool or adaptions of it have been used in diverse contexts (e.g., Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Sun, 2010). Although Dibble et al. (2016) found evidence that the measurement tool is misleading as it includes more than just reactions during media consumption and rather measures PSRs than PSIs, it is still very popular and one of the most used measurement instruments to capture parasocial experiences up until now (Liebers & Schramm, 2019).

The next measurement that caught attention and was used in several investigations is the Audience–Persona Interaction Scale by Auter and Palmgreen (2000). Similar to the PSI-Scale, this scale includes more than just reception-related reactions toward media personalities, but it is not as popular as the PSI-Scale. Schramm and Hartmann (2008) attended to the research gap of capturing reception-related reactions toward a media character and, in doing so, introduced the PSI-Process Scales—a collection of items that represent media users' cognitive, affective, and conative reactions toward a media character—and offers the advantage that researchers can exactly pick out the items that suit their context the best. Accordingly, the PSI-Process Scales offer a relatively broad spectrum of reactions that, among others, include the illusion of f-t-f communication but are not limited to it. To still have the chance to measure the latter in a more explicit way, Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) developed the so-called Experience of Parasocial Interaction Scale. This scale concentrates on the illusion of f-t-f communication in line with the original introduction of the PSI concept by Horton and Wohl (1956). With regard to the explicit measurement of PSR, the Multiple Parasocial Relationships Scale by Tukachinsky (2010) was established. This measurement instrument provides items to measure amicable as well as romantic PSRs with media personalities and is therefore used in a wide range of different contexts.

Having introduced the (from our perspective) most influential measurement instruments, it has to be noted that there are many more, ranging from measurement tools that concentrate on romantic parasocial experiences (Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018) to ones that separate between PSRs with real characters and those with fictional characters (Slater et

al., 2018), to ones that use simplified forms of measurement, such as asking if a media user wants to have a drink with a media personality (Powell et al., 2012). Despite the diversity of already existing measurement instruments, we make a forecast that the development of measurement tools will continue. As diverse as our media landscape is, as diverse are the contexts in which we investigate its characters. Moreover, there are some aspects that we did not even start to develop measurement tools for, such as the PSR stages (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). Chapter 4 provides an overview of validity considerations associated with many of these individual measures.

Conceptualizations of the Development of Parasocial Experiences

The conceptualization of the development of PSIs and PSRs can be considered another important milestone within parasocial research. Since the introduction of parasocial experiences by Horton and Wohl (1956), scientists have been interested in predictors of PSIs and PSRs, such as loneliness (e.g., A. M. Rubin et al., 1985). However, investigating predictors is not necessarily the same as engaging in the theoretical conceptualization of the development of a complex construct. Reflecting on this reality, several authors attended to this research gap and, in doing so, advanced our understanding of parasocial experiences. In the following, we list a few examples. Gleich (1997), as an example, introduced the cycle-process model assuming, as already mentioned, that PSIs and PSRs influence each other mutually. Giles (2002), in turn, modeled the development of parasocial experiences in the context of other social encounters. Hartmann et al. (2004) chose a different focus and conceptualized the formation of PSIs during media reception in their two-level model of PSIs (for an English summary, see Klimmt et al., 2006). With regard to romantic parasocial experiences, Erickson et al. (2018) introduced a multidimensional model of the formation of romantic parasocial attachments within adolescence. The most recent conceptualization addressed the rather long-term relationship formation between a media user and a media character and was made by Tukachinsky and Stever (2019). They assumed that PSRs develop in relationship stages and transfer the relationship stages model by Knapp (1978), originally introduced in social psychology, to the media context (for more detailed information on the development of parasocial experiences, see Chapter 5).

The Integration of Other Theories to Advance the Understanding of Parasocial Experiences

One of the key assumptions with regard to parasocial experiences is their similarity with real-life social interactions and relationships (e.g., Tukachinsky, 2010). Reflecting on this reality, the integration of existing theories originally rooted in social psychology into parasocial research has a long tradition and advanced our understanding of parasocial experiences considerably. A prominent example is the parasocial contact hypothesis (Schiappa et al., 2005) that integrated the contact hypothesis by Allport (1954) to

explain how parasocial experiences can reduce prejudices by offering (parasocial) contact with unknown social groups (see also Chapter 12). Another example is the investigation of attachment theory and, accordingly, attachment styles (Bowlby, 1973) in the context of parasocial experiences to explore how individuals transfer their real-life attachment behavior to the context of media characters (e.g., Greenwood & Long, 2011). Further examples include the integration of social exchange and relationship investment theories (Blau, 1964). In this context, studies on how media users consider the benefits and costs of parasocial experiences when engaging in them were able to take great advantage of former social psychological knowledge (e.g., Adam & Sizemore, 2013). Last and most recently, the integration of theories on relationship formation should be listed here. As already explained in this chapter, Tukachinsky and Stever (2019) based their PSR stages model on the social-psychological model by Knapp (1978), which described relationship stages within real-life social relationships.

The last paragraph focused on the integration of social psychological theories within parasocial research, as these are the most widely integrated theories. However, it has to be noted that they are not the only existing theories that have been integrated to advance our understanding of parasocial experiences. Other examples include the uses-and-gratifications approach (Blumler & Katz, 1974), which has been used to better understand the motivation to engage in parasocial experiences with media characters (e.g., Perloff & Krevans, 1987), or the concept of eudaimonic entertainment (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993), which can help to understand the implications of parasocial experiences for media users' well-being (e.g., Liebers & Schramm, 2022).

The Development of Empirical Research on Parasocial Experiences

As already mentioned in this chapter, empirical research has rated high in parasocial research since the beginning. In the next paragraphs, we outline the historical development and milestones in empirical research on parasocial experiences.

The First Empirical Studies on Parasocial Experiences

After having been introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), it took more than 15 years until the first empirical study on parasocial experiences was published by Rosengren and Windahl (1972). They were also the first to address the question of whether parasocial experiences can be seen as a form of functional alternative for individuals with social deficits in real-life empirically—a question that is popular within the scientific community until the present day (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). During the following years, the interest in parasocial experiences remained rather low, with empirical research on the phenomenon published only sporadically. Duck and Noble (1979), as well as Noble (1983), for example, presented two studies on toddlers' parasocial experiences with the popular TV series *Sesame Street* and *Playschool*. Levy (1979), Wenner (1983), and Houlberg (1984), in turn, presented studies in the context of TV news. Continuing this line of research, A.

M. Rubin et al. (1985) investigated parasocial experiences with local TV newscasters in the context of loneliness and, in doing so, introduced the already mentioned popular PSI-Scale. The same year, the interest in parasocial experiences slowly began to grow, which we describe in the next section.

The Slowly Growing Worldwide Interest in Parasocial Research

From the middle of the 1980s, the interest in parasocial experiences within the scientific community slowly began to grow. In 1987, for example, three empirical studies on parasocial experiences were published (Perloff & Krevans, 1987; A. M. Rubin & Perse, 1987; R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987), which is quite a lot compared to the eight empirical studies that had been published in total in the time between the introduction of the concept in 1956 until 1985. This trend continued in the 1990s. During this time, many influential authors joined the scientific community investigating parasocial experiences and advanced our understanding of the concept and its implications by researching measurement tools (Auter, 1992; Stever, 1991); exploring the persuasive impact of parasocial experiences (Auter & Moore, 1993; Brown & Basil, 1995; Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1998); and collecting deeper insights by publishing and editing entire books on parasocial research (Fabian, 1993; Gleich, 1997; Vorderer, 1996). Although the books were published in German, this gave the research community a big boost, as these works were influential for subsequent international publications (e.g., Klimmt et al., 2006). After the turn of the millennium, the interest in parasocial research increased considerably, with 3 to 11 studies published a year until 2008, when the number of publications further rose and evened out at approximately 15 publications a year until 2013 (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). By then, the concept of parasocial experiences had been investigated in diverse media contexts, ranching from computer games (Jin, 2010) to radio broadcasts (A. M. Rubin & Step, 2000), and different scientific disciplines discovered the concept for their research.

The Continuing Boom of Parasocial Research

Whereas we record about 15 publications a year from 2008 to 2013, this number first doubled (2014), then tripled (2018), and even quadrupled (2020) in the following years. This led to nearly 70 new publications of original empirical studies on parasocial experiences published just in the year 2020. Figure 1.1 illustrates this growth by showing the cumulative number of publications of empirical studies on parasocial experiences from 1956 to 2020. There are several possible reasons for the strong increase in research on parasocial experiences since 2013, with the growing popularity of social media and research on parasocial experiences with social media influencers (e.g., Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2020) just one of them. Another reason might be the growing diversification in parasocial research, which particularly gained importance during the last 10 years and is addressed in detail in the next paragraphs. In conclusion, no matter what causes

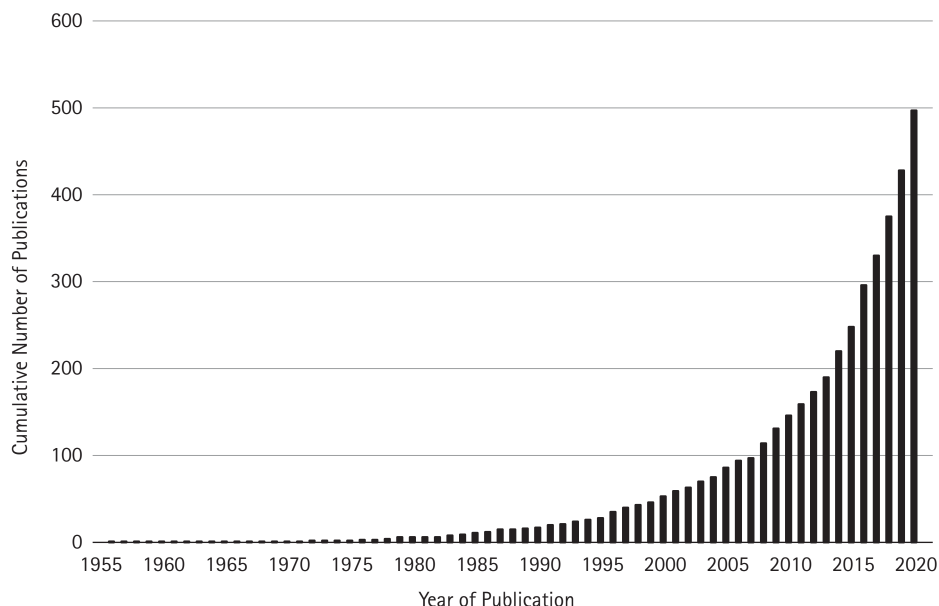

Figure 1.1 Cumulative number of original empirical studies on parasocial experiences published from 1956 to 2020. The search for and selection of studies was based on the criteria used by Liebers and Schramm (2019).

might underlie the boom of parasocial research, the trend is here—and reflecting on the reality that media characters are more present than ever thanks to advances in the media landscape—the growth trend is probably here to stay.

The Diversification of Parasocial Research

One of the reasons that underlie the high number of empirical studies on parasocial experiences currently is the diversification of the research field. In this section, we outline the most important aspects of the diversification from the investigation of parasocial experiences beyond friendship, the scope of media characters and settings in parasocial research, up to parasocial research across disciplines.

Research on Parasocial Experiences Beyond Friendship Between Two Individuals

As already mentioned in this chapter, the vast majority of empirical studies on parasocial experiences focus on amicable forms of PSIs and PSRs. In the first 60 years of parasocial research (1956–2015), for example, 83.6% of empirical studies in parasocial research focused solely on amicable PSIs and PSRs, neglecting other forms of parasocial experiences, such as romantic or negative ones (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). Hence, research on nonamicable forms of parasocial experiences is still rare. However, especially in the last decade, more research on other forms of parasocial experiences emerged, with romantic parasocial experiences being particularly popular (see also the section “The Introduction of Other Forms of Parasocial Experiences Besides Friendship” in this chapter). Including

not only amicable but also romantic and negative parasocial experiences not only broadened our understanding of parasocial experiences but also opened new contexts in which parasocial experiences are investigated, such as romantic loneliness (e.g., Liebers, 2022), intimate feelings of betrayal (e.g., Schnarre & Adam, 2018), or indifference (e.g., Hartmann et al., 2008). In doing so, research on nonamicable facets of parasocial experiences advanced the diversification of parasocial research significantly, and we assume that this trend will continue throughout the next decades.

The inclusion of romantic and negative parasocial experiences is the most obvious but not the only way in which parasocial research expanded beyond friendship between two individuals during the last decades. Another form of diversification is the investigation of parasocial experiences beyond social entities. Initially, parasocial experiences described (amicable) interactions and relationships between media users and media characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In doing so, media characters mean a wide range of different fictional and nonfictional personalities, from book characters (e.g., Burnett & Beto, 2000) to social media influencers (e.g., Leite & Baptista, 2022) (see also the next section). Despite all their differences, these media characters have one thing in common: They are seen as social entities by the media users, and the identification of the media character as a social entity has been named a premise of parasocial experiences (see also Hartmann, 2016; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). However, a growing number of empirical studies goes beyond this understanding and investigates parasocial experiences with other "communication partners," such as brands (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2018), robots (e.g., Noor et al., 2022), and websites (e.g., Zhou & Jia, 2018). Although scientists with a more traditional focus sometimes doubt that research that goes beyond investigating "classic" social entities should be conducted under the label of parasocial research (e.g., Liebers & Schramm, 2019), this trend enhances diversification of the research field and needs to be noted in a full overview of the history and scope of parasocial research.

The Scope of Media Characters and Settings in Parasocial Research

Initially, parasocial experiences were introduced in the context of the new, back in those days, mass media television (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This media context and its media characters, such as TV show hosts (e.g., Rosengren et al., 1976), TV newscaster (e.g., Perse, 1990), or TV series characters (e.g., A. M. Rubin & Perse, 1987), remained the focus of parasocial research for a long time, and investigating parasocial experiences with television characters has been popular until the present day (e.g., Bond, 2021). However, along the years of parasocial research, the scope of media characters and media contexts broadened significantly. Briefly summarized, this diversification happened in two different ways: (1) by examining media characters that were already present in media but did not yet play a role in parasocial research; and (2) by staying up to date with regard to developments in the media landscape and investigating media characters that newly emerge along with advances in the media landscape. In line with the first way, parasocial research began

to study parasocial experiences with media characters from other media contexts, such as novel protagonists (e.g., Burnett & Beto, 2000). Moreover, scientists also began to investigate parasocial experiences with famous media personalities that are not popular through one specific media context but famous across different media contexts, such as athletes (e.g., Brown & Basil, 1995), musicians (e.g., Sanderson, 2009), or politicians (e.g., Powell et al., 2011). In line with the second way, parasocial research followed the trends set by new developments within the media landscape. In doing so, scientists started to investigate PSIs and PSRs with avatars from games (e.g., Chung & Kim, 2009) and social media influencers (e.g., Frederick et al., 2012). Particularly for the latter, the investigation of media characters in the context of social media gained immense popularity during the last decade and is one of the reasons for the strong growth of the research field.

Parasocial Research Across Disciplines

Currently, a wide range of disciplines engages in the investigation of parasocial experiences, bringing in numerous different perspectives and research foci on parasocial research. Originally, the concept of parasocial experiences was introduced by an anthropologist and a sociologist (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Despite their scientific roots, the authors addressed different scientific communities in their article that, in the following decades, started to investigate parasocial experiences. One of these scientific communities is clinical psychology—this becomes clear, among others, by reflecting on the reality that the article by Horton and Wohl (1956) was published in the journal *Psychiatry*. Despite being seen as an everyday phenomenon since the introduction by Horton and Wohl (1956), parasocial experiences have the potential to gain such intensity that they rather are explained as a pathological phenomenon (McCutcheon et al., 2002). Under the label "celebrity worship," these intense parasocial experiences are often investigated in contexts such as stalking, mental health, and dissociation (e.g., Maltby et al., 2006; Reyes et al., 2016; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2008) (for more details in pathological aspects of parasocial experiences, see also Chapter 9).

Another scientific community that was engaged in parasocial research right from the beginning is social psychology. Reflecting on the reality that parasocial experiences are assumed to be similar to everyday interactions and relationships between two "real" individuals, this is rather obvious. Nowadays, the influence of social psychology can be seen in various ways, from the integration of social psychological theories (see also the previous section "The Integration of Other Theories to Advance the Understanding of Parasocial Experiences" in this chapter) to studies investigating parasocial experiences in the context of media users' broader social environment (e.g., Derrick et al., 2009; Schiappa et al., 2006).

A discipline that also has a long tradition in parasocial research but became particularly important during the last decade is marketing and economics. Horton and Wohl

(1956) already assumed in their article that parasocial experiences might lead to more trust in media characters, which can be used to promote brands and products effectively. In line with this assumption, former research investigated how parasocial experiences enhance the effectiveness of television shopping (e.g., Auter & Moore, 1993; Currás-Pérez et al., 2011; Grant et al., 1991; Lim & Kim, 2011). Other studies focused on the impact of parasocial experiences on the persuasive effectiveness of product placements in the context of television broadcasts, although this research focus is rather scarce (e.g., Knoll et al., 2015). With the rise of social media, investigating parasocial experiences in the context of product placements and sponsoring became very popular (see also the next section on current trends in parasocial research). Now, a growing number of studies investigated the impact of parasocial experiences on the effectiveness of influencer marketing (e.g., Breves, Liebers, et al., 2021; Lee & Lee, 2022; Shan et al., 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020).

Concluding, communications sciences and media psychology should be listed here. Although the concept was initially introduced by scientists from another discipline due to the comparably young history of communications sciences and media psychology, we would root parasocial research in these disciplines now. Communication scientists and media psychologists research how parasocial experiences develop (e.g., Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019), how they should be operationalized across different situations (e.g., Schramm & Wirth, 2010), and how they impact media users in different ways, ranging from entertainment effects (e.g., Baldwin & Raney, 2021) to the development of schemas and beliefs (e.g., Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018). Research undertaken from communication scientists and media psychologists now builds the basis for the other disciplines to develop their theoretical research perspectives and methodological approaches.

Current Trends in Parasocial Research

Throughout this chapter, it became clear that parasocial research is constantly evolving. In the last section of this first chapter, we focus on current research trends that you will also find in more detail in the following chapters of this handbook. But before we go into details with specific research themes, we want to address a rather overall shift in research during the last years. In the first decades of parasocial research, one of the most dominant research questions was why and how individuals engage in parasocial experiences. This included questions such as which personal attributes foster the development of parasocial experiences (e.g., Perloff & Krevans, 1987; Rosengren & Windahl, 1972) and to what extent are parasocial experiences a wanted gratification that motivates individuals to consume mass media (e.g., A. M. Rubin et al., 1985; Wenner, 1983). Although these questions are still investigated (e.g., Brodie & Ingram, 2021), we now notice a trend toward investigating how parasocial experiences have an impact on individuals. In the following, we present three popular examples of current research trends investigating outcomes of parasocial experiences.

One rather obvious research trend that has already been mentioned multiple times throughout this chapter is the investigation of parasocial experiences with social media influencers. The gaining popularity of social media influencers is mirrored in the scientific community's interest in digital opinion leaders. As one of the key attributes of social media influencers is their strong bonding and intimacy with their followers (e.g., Vrontis et al., 2021), the concept of parasocial experiences provides an optimal theoretical background for empirical studies in this context. In doing so, the specific interest in parasocial experiences with social media influencers varies and includes not only advertising effects but also other impacts, such as the role of parasocial experiences with social media influencers on healthy eating (e.g., Sakib et al., 2020) or intention to exercise (e.g., Sokolova & Perez, 2021). However, researching the persuasive impact of parasocial experiences with social media influencers in commercial settings is by far the most popular in this context, and numerous studies have already been conducted to gain further knowledge on how social media users currently are persuaded by social media influencers (e.g., Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2020).

Another current trend that is gaining popularity is the investigation of how parasocial experiences can be beneficial for intergroup relationships. In line with the so-called parasocial contact hypothesis (Schiappa et al., 2005), it is assumed that parasocial contact with individuals from other social groups can help to reduce prejudices and stereotypical views (see also Chapter 12). Particularly during the last 5 years, several studies have been conducted to test the parasocial contact hypothesis and found evidence in various intergroup contexts, ranging from race (e.g., Stamps & Sahlman, 2021) and sexual identity (e.g., Bond, 2021) to health stigma reduction (e.g., Wong et al., 2017).

Last, one research trend that by itself is very popular in communication sciences and media psychology is the investigation of how media consumption can be beneficial for media users' well-being (e.g., Vorderer & Reinecke, 2015; Wirth et al., 2012; Zillmann, 1988). Parasocial research adopted this research focus by studying how parasocial experiences can increase media users' well-being in several different ways. One way is the investigation of how parasocial experiences can support individuals during certain stages of life, such as during adolescence (e.g., Erickson et al., 2018; see also Chapter 8) or in the retirement age (e.g., Bernhold & Metzger, 2020; see also Chapter 9). Another possibility is to research how parasocial experiences can provide feelings of relatedness (e.g., Derrick et al., 2009; see also Chapter 10) or can shape perceptions of self (e.g., Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013; see also Chapter 11). In conclusion, we also note a trend toward investigating how parasocial experiences influence identity processes within individuals whose social groups tend to be underrepresented within media contexts, such as people of color (e.g., Hall, 2022; see also Chapter 18) or members of the LGBTQA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, asexual, and other identities) community (e.g., Woznicki et al., 2021; see also Chapter 13).

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CHAPTER

2

Defining Parasocial Relationship Experiences

David Giles

Abstract

The chapter offers a conceptual definition of parasocial relationships as a distinct construct, and it explores its theoretical relationship to other related phenomena. It defines various types of parasocial relationships, and it outlines the scope of these experiences, including their prevalence across different media formats, channels, and platforms and different types of media content. The chapter explicates how parasocial relationships are different from, yet related to, other media experiences, such as parasocial interactions, parasocial attachment, fandom, celebrity worship, and character identification and to what extent they can be applied to describe other forms of engagement (e.g., with brands).

Key Words: social relationships, parasocial attachment, interactive media, fandom, negative parasocial relationships, romantic parasocial relationships, artificial intelligence

Introduction

How do you know when you're in a relationship? At what point does a mere encounter evolve into a relationship, and when can you say, "I am in a relationship with person X?" How does a relationship end? Does the death of person X mean the relationship is dead too?

All these questions pertain equally to social and parasocial relationships (PSRs). We are often led to believe that PSRs, being "para" perhaps, are necessarily unconscious, beneath our awareness. When Princess Diana died, many of the posts on a BBC tribute website spoke of people's surprise at their bereavement reactions to the event (Giles, 2000). A similar experience may occur when a neighbor dies—perhaps someone whose death touches you even though you had barely exchanged a word with them.

At the same time, we have other relationships that we are very much aware of and are able, to some extent, to control. We can choose to meet someone on a dating site and likewise choose to drop them. We might accept, or reject, a job because we like, or dislike, our potential line manager. We are *very* aware of kin relationships: We may go to great lengths to track down long-lost cousins or estranged family members with whom we have

never spoken but with whom we share an unbreakable genetic connection. We would never consider such relationships "parasocial" even when the other partner is unaware they are related to us.

These examples make it clear that relationship experiences in general are highly diverse, and that social relationships, which we tend to think of as "true," "real" phenomena, contain elements that we label parasocial in the context of media figures. In this chapter, I explore some of the gray regions in the social–parasocial boundary and how these are manifested in different types of PSR experience, with particular reference to the rapidly changing contemporary media landscape.

When Is a Relationship Social or Parasocial?

The concept of PSRs emerged during a period in media history when there was a seemingly clear dividing line between media figures and media users. Couldry (2003) talked about the "public sphere" as a mythical space where the general public (who we would think of as media users) encounter celebrities, media producers, and public figures such as politicians (in other words, media figures). Occasionally, the general public were able to penetrate the public sphere—as gameshow contestants, eyewitness interviewees, listeners phoning in to talk radio—but in most cases they remained anonymous, returning to the mass audience of the "general public" once their brief contribution was finished.

This perceived separation of media figures and media users effectively formed the social–parasocial boundary. During the era of broadcast media, there were relatively few ways to cross the boundary; besides those lucky few who received an invitation to contribute to a radio or TV show, you could write a letter to the fan club of an admired celebrity, but the reply would most likely be from the fan club secretary. If you were very lucky you might get an authentic signature. Broadcast media afforded very little public access. Your best chance of reciprocal interaction with a media figure was a chance meeting in physical space, bumping into a celebrity in a fashionable store, fleeting eye contact from the distant stage to the front row of a huge auditorium, or, for those willing to wait for hours in the cold and the rain, a swift exchange outside a hotel or recording studio.

Parasocial relationships, then, are understood best as meaningful attachments to media figures that persist despite this seemingly impenetrable boundary. They are psychological phenomena that may be experienced at either an individual or a collective level. As a result, the reality status of the media figure is not a barrier to the strength or meaningfulness of the PSR, so we can develop just as strong a PSR with a real-life celebrity, a dead celebrity, a fictional character, or a nonhuman character (nonhuman because they are a cartoon, an animal, or a fantasy character). The interchangeable nature of media figure types has led to the frequent assumption that PSRs are essentially fantasies, and arguably maladaptive ones, that are indulged in by people as compensation for dysfunctional or nonexistent social relationships, a position that is common in the literature on "celebrity worship" (Stever, 2011; also see Chapter 9 in this volume).

This raises the question of how much conscious control media users have over the initiation and development of a PSR. Parasocial bereavement may catch us by surprise because we are cautious about our own personal responses to media: the "third-person effect" (Davison, 1983) means that we downplay the impact that media have on us and that will inevitably include our acknowledgment of PSRs. Indeed, much of the time people try to bracket off some PSRs from others by claiming that relationships with politicians, for example, are logical, necessary, and important, while others (with entertainment celebrities or fictional characters) are relatively trivial and dispensable. In a study of Twitter interaction with Donald Trump, Paravati et al. (2020) demonstrated how, in a field like politics, people can be unaware of the way their PSR with a candidate feeds into their own behavior (in this instance, voting).

Parasocial relationships cannot necessarily be explained as an effect of broadcast media themselves. Even before television and radio, the "public sphere" of newspapers, books, and other communication events populated the public imagination with a cast of important and familiar figures. Since antiquity, individuals could relate to public figures, such as theater actors and politicians, even without knowing them personally (see, e.g., Tukachinsky Forster, 2021; and Chapter 15 in this volume). There is no doubt, however, that mass electronic media have facilitated the formation of an enormous number of PSRs for each media user, and this number has increased exponentially with the emergence of digital media. If humans are instinctively primed to treat media content as real (Reeves & Nass, 1996), we should effectively form PSRs in the same way as social ones. And indeed, numerous studies over the years have found that, from a social cognitive perspective, PSR experiences share many of the same psychological characteristics as social relationship experiences (Alperstein, 1991; Bond & Calvert, 2014; Eyal & Dailey, 2012; Rosaen & Dibble, 2017; R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987, to name just a handful).

To conclude, then, PSRs differ from social ones largely because they are the property of one individual alone. They are afforded by, though not necessarily dependent on, mass media, and they are understood as phenomena that arise out of a "public sphere" that defines a boundary between the mass audience, or general public, and a pool of significant individuals that constitute a category that we usually refer to as "media figures." Digital media have blurred these distinctions somewhat, as I will go on to argue in the last section of this chapter. For this reason and others, we need to understand PSRs in a historical, as well as a technological, context.

Varieties of Parasocial Relationship

Parasocial relationships are typically investigated by researchers who are primarily interested in a particular medium (film, television, or literature) and so are simply applying the parasocial concept to a specific context. However, there have been a few attempts made to classify PSRs into different types. The following sections review some of these taxonomies and other dimensions along which PSRs can be considered.

Taxonomies of Parasocial Relationships

In Giles (2002), I attempted to differentiate three "levels" of parasocial interaction (PSI) based on the potential for a PSR to develop into a social relationship. A first-order PSR is one with high social potential: The media figure is a living human being, representing themselves (e.g., a newscaster or celebrity). A second-order PSR is one where a living human being is representing a fictional character, such as a film role. Here, a media user could only form a social relationship with the actor, so the PSR is effectively with a text (i.e., can only work at the level of imagination). A third-order one is a PSR that does not even allow the media user the possibility of stepping outside the text and interacting with an actor because the media figure is dead or nonhuman (a cartoon, fantasy figure, or animal).

The idea behind this taxonomy was that media users will have different motivations for forming PSRs, and that a purely textual PSR—where there is no prospect of actually meeting the figure or developing a social relationship with them—ought to elicit different kinds of relationship experiences from a PSR with a living human. A teenager fantasizing about a pop star may harbor a distant dream of meeting them; an aspiring musician may have a concrete ambition to get to know them at a professional and personal level. Both individuals may be strongly attached to a fictional character, even one in nonhuman form, but they will not be able to incorporate such fantasies or ambitions about the social potential of the relationship. In this way, not all PSRs are equal.

An attempt to improve on the Giles (2002) taxonomy of media figures was undertaken by Tsay-Vogel and Schwartz (2014), who used the attribute of *authenticity* to propose an alternative model. They argued that the distinguishing criterion of potential social relationships meant that the earlier taxonomy had limited scope. Instead, they drew on Rosaen and Dibble's (2008) two-dimensional concept of media figure realism that proposed that we can evaluate figures in terms of the realism of both their appearance and their behavior. Tsay-Vogel and Schwartz's (2014) taxonomy has four dimensions: depiction (appearance), "story" (fiction or nonfiction), form (human or nonhuman), and traits (supernatural or typically human). They hypothesized that media figures at the realistic end of these dimensions would elicit stronger PSRs, although as yet no empirical test of either this or the Giles (2002) taxonomy exists to support either model.

One distinction between the models that must be considered, however, is that they may be suited to different types of media figure. As Tsay-Vogel and Schwartz (2014) argued, the Giles (2002) model does not consider PSRs with dead humans, and it is hard to see where these might be placed given the model's organizing principle of potential social relationship. Ultimately, both models are largely constructed for the purpose of explaining PSRs with fictional characters. For taxonomies of living humans, we are reliant on classifications of different types of celebrity (Giles, 2000; Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2004), though these are mainly concerned with explaining how individuals become famous rather than the kinds of PSR they afford their audiences.

Specific Types of Parasocial Relationships

Instead of assuming that different media figures elicit different types of PSR, an alternative way of differentiating relationships might be to focus, at the level of the media user, on different types of parasocial *experience*. Perhaps the most fully developed approach to differentiating PSRs this way is the distinction between the amicable and romantic forms of relationship, as proposed by various authors, most notably Tukachinsky (2010) and Erickson and Dal Cin (2018). In both cases, new measures of PSR have been developed that assess the strength of romantic attachment to the figure, equating the PSR (in the latter case) to a secret "crush" that we might have on a social acquaintance, where we harbor romantic feelings for them that, for whatever reason, we never act on. Tukachinsky and Dorros (2018) found that such PSRs may, however, raise expectations, particularly for younger individuals, about (other, social) romantic relationships more generally, in line with earlier research that hypothesized romantic and other PSRs as "rehearsals" for adult relationships (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Giles & Maltby, 2004).

A further attempt to explore romantic PSRs is Liebers and Schramm's (2017) study looking at PSRs with literary characters. They argued that literature should generate more intense PSRs because of the insight the reader has into characters' feelings and motivations, and because books—if written in sufficiently simple language to make one lose sight of the literary construction—have the ability to "transport" readers into an alternative reality. They found that "presence" (effectively, the experience of transportation) was a significant predictor of "amicable" (platonic) PSRs, but not romantic ones. The only significant predictor for these was physical attractiveness (i.e., how physically attractive readers imagined the protagonist to be, not how the author depicted the protagonist). The authors did concede that, since participants were free to choose their favorite books and characters, and that most of these, such as *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*, were also popular films, participants' evaluation of attractiveness might be influenced by factors other than reading. Separating purely literary PSRs from more general ones may require research with specialized audiences (and may also require consideration of PSRs with authors themselves).

Nonamicable Parasocial Relationships

One of the longest-running assumptions about PSRs is that they are necessarily positive in nature—we do not form PSRs, it is claimed, with media figures unless we like, fancy, or admire them. Indeed, earlier this century I had a paper rejected by an academic journal on the basis that a PSR cannot possibly be negative. To my mind, this is a complete misunderstanding of the phenomenon, stemming either from confusion (between PSRs and fandom or celebrity worship) or an overly rigid adherence to construct validity (I had another paper rejected once on the basis that I could not measure PSRs without using the A. M. Rubin et al., 1985, scale). It suggests that media users cannot form meaningful relationships with media figures unless they are positive, which would leave us unable to

explain the many instances of "celebrity bashing" (Ouvrein et al., 2018) and other abusive behavior toward figures in the media.

Nevertheless, few researchers have directly explored negative PSRs. One exception is Hartmann et al.'s (2008) study of PSRs with racing drivers, where they were able to identify both PSRs elicited by favorite drivers and corresponding negative PSRs with rival drivers. Notably, these negative relationships were not driven by indifference; the stronger the antipathy toward the drivers, the more they desired the driver to lose. However, this desire did not influence the degree of suspense experienced by study participants during the race as much as the strength of the positive PSR toward favorite drivers. The authors concluded that, in this instance at least, negative PSRs were largely a "side effect of a positive PSR" (p. 31).

Disappointingly few attempts have been made to follow up this interesting line of research: There is an implicit assumption in the literature that PSRs are generated by the same social cognitive processes as friendships, which has limited the range of PSR experiences considered (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). A rare exception is Bernhold's (2019) study of older adults, who were asked to identify their least favorite "character" on television. Although the author's range of suggestions included all kinds of real and fictional figures in diverse fields, Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump were the most frequently nominated. While "antipathy" (negative PSR) failed to correlate significantly with any single variable, it was found to be associated in path models with certain attachment styles and low (social) relationship satisfaction. The author concluded that some older adults, at least, should try to expend less mental energy in maintaining these negative PSRs, and even that newsreaders issue trigger warnings to viewers about upcoming political content!

The formation of negative PSRs is clearly a field in need of considerable research, which may indeed assist our understanding of PSRs in general. It is highly unlikely that they are indicative of poor relationship quality generally (although one might naturally assume a small correlation), and clearly not all negative PSRs will be corollaries of positive ones, as in the example of competitive sport. However, when it comes to fictitious PSRs, the narrative context itself affords a range of positive and negative reader/viewer engagements since heroes and villains are intrinsic components of dramatic stories.

Konijn and Hoorn (2005) explored these engagements in a study of cognitive and affective responses to different film characters. Although not conceived within a framework of PSRs, their findings are relevant to negative PSRs in that they demonstrate the way that the most popular characters were often those that embody multiple elements, both good and bad. Indeed, the film characters we often enjoy the most are those that we might actually *dislike*. This finding is sometimes interpreted by parasocial authors as implying a preference for authenticity or realism, but what it really demonstrates is how limited our understanding of PSRs is when we confine study participants to single, unambiguous options such as "favorite" or "disliked." It is also possible that our PSRs with nonfictional figures incorporate a similar degree of ambivalence, allowing us to partial out

different elements of a figure so that we can admire their talents (acting, music, sport, etc.) while simultaneously disapproving of their opinions or behavior (Hu, 2016). It is unlikely this ambivalence would result in a high score on a (positive) measure of PSR "strength," but it is unquestionably a feature of some of the most meaningful and enduring PSRs, as I argue further in the chapter in the context of fandom. Click and Tukachinsky Forster in Chapter 17 in this volume bring together theories of antifandom to propose a novel model for examining negative PSRs.

Actor/Character Differentiation

It is not only morally ambiguous fictitious creations that blur the distinction between positive and negative PSRs. What about the people who portray them? When we are watching a film, particularly one that has gripped ("transported") us, are we interacting with the fictional persona or admiring the skills of the actor? Parasocial researchers have become increasingly interested in the way that audiences negotiate this cognitive balancing act. There are many anecdotes in the film and TV world about actors who have been berated by members of the public (e.g., taxi drivers) for the behavior of their on-screen characters, and it is tempting just to dismiss these as failed breaches of the fantasy/reality boundary. But various authors have explained them in terms of the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977), a common tendency to misattribute events to the dispositional features of individuals rather than to less cognitively available circumstantial factors (Tal-Or & Papirman, 2007; Tukachinsky, 2020).

Actor/character confusion is most likely with long-running drama series such as soaps, where actors have become famous primarily for the character they portray day in day out. One study that examined what we might call "the taxi driver error" was studied by Tukachinsky (2020). In the experiment, participants watched Jennifer Aniston playing either a villain or a likable character. Then, they were asked to evaluate an actor's prosocial behavior (endorsing a children's hospital). In the villain condition, evaluation of the actor was significantly lower, suggesting an overspill of parasocial engagement with the character.

However, most of the research on the topic has looked at well-known actors who portray a variety of characters. Potentially, here media users could develop multiple PSRs: one primary PSR with a professional actor and celebrity (e.g., Rowan Atkinson), others with their different fictional personas (Mr. Bean, Blackadder, etc.). A scandal involving the actor might certainly damage one's PSR with the actor, but (depending on its severity) may well leave the character PSRs unscathed. This was tested by Hu (2016) using the actor George Clooney: After reading about a (fictitious) scandal involving the actor, participants saw either a 30-minute excerpt from a Clooney film or an equivalent segment of a talk show with Clooney as a guest. Parasocial interaction was higher in the film condition, suggesting that the scandal had less impact on the viewers' engagement with the character he was portraying.

Together, these studies demonstrate the importance of better understanding the interplay between PSRs with fictional characters and actors that play them. However, very few researchers measure PSR with actor and character separately. Slater et al. (2018) is a notable exception (see also Box 4.13).

Parasocial Relationships in Different Media Contexts

One way in which PSRs have been differentiated is in the media context in which they are formed. Of course, the context of the initial encounter mostly plays a role in the processes of PSI (see Chapter 3) rather than the longer term formation of a relationship. However, with the advent of digital culture it is evident that different mediated contexts afford different types of media figure and potentially different types of relationship (Giles, 2018). As explicated below, these digital platforms extended audience relationships to a wider range of objects, many neither social nor parasocial.

Social Media and Live Streaming. The direct address of YouTube vlogs, for example, intensifies interaction (Kreissl et al., 2021), and while PSI does not necessarily have a direct relationship to PSR (Dibble et al., 2016), there are additional features of social media that invite long-term engagement with social media figures, such as interactive comments/posts, regular (even daily) recordings, and the heightened realism of the vlogger environment (Giles, 2018; Reinikainen et al., 2020).

One particular social medium that has attracted PSR research is live streaming of video gameplay, particularly on the platform Twitch, where well-known gamers interact with their followers while engaged in gameplay (Kowert & Daniel, 2021; Leith, 2021; McLaughlin & Wohn, 2021). While such PSRs share many of the characteristics of traditional ones, the interactivity of the chat stream on Twitch violates some of the assumptions of PSI as originally conceived during the broadcast media era (see Chapter 3), and led Kowert and Daniel (2021) to describe such relationships as "one-and-a-half-way" PSRs, which are neither fully parasocial in the sense of being nonreciprocal nor fully social in that the boundary between media users and figures, despite this communication access, remains largely unbreached. I return to this position, and its implication for the understanding of PSRs in general, further in the chapter.

Another way of differentiating PSRs in the digital era is by examining their maintenance across multiple media. Wellman (2021) has called these "transmediated PSRs" and argued that PSRs are differentially shaped by the affordances of different platforms (e.g., Facebook vs. Twitter). This is hardly a new idea, or one specific to digital culture: Process-based considerations of PSR phenomena (Giles, 2002; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019) have already described the way that PSRs build up through engagement with media figures in various print, broadcast, and digital media irrespective of the context in which the figure is initially encountered. However, Wellman (2021) and other recent researchers have begun to draw on different data, notably posts and other textual comments, as evidence for PSR formation. Importantly, these provide a context for considering PSRs as

shared experiences rather than just as isolated cognitive phenomena; for the same reason, Hills (2016) preferred the term "multisocial interaction" to PSI, although here again the context is important since he was largely concerned with fandom rather than PSRs more generally. I return to this point in the next section of the chapter.

Artificial Intelligence. A recent technological phenomenon with obvious parasocial potential is the conversational agent, or vocal assistant, such as Apple's Siri or Amazon's Alexa. Their disembodied voice may lack the visual imagery that drives PSI with film and television figures, but its interactive properties can generate a sense of "presence," and the illusion of reciprocity, particularly for younger audiences. Hoffman et al. (2021) suggested that this is dependent on the same "anthropomorphic thinking" that enables children to develop PSRs with cuddly toys and dolls. In the majority of families they studied, the primary-age children "perceived the conversational agent as human-like and believed it was socially realistic" (p. 613), though the extent to which this constitutes a relationship is unclear. It is perhaps the case that anthropomorphic thinking underpins the "media equation" more generally (Reeves & Nass, 1996), but anyone who has used a conversational agent for more than a few minutes, even a young child, will appreciate its interactive limitations. Not endowed with even the illusion of reciprocity, a favorite teddy will never disappoint in the same way. Indeed, Noor et al. (2022) found that anthropomorphism (i.e., thinking about artificial intelligence-based applications such as Siri and Alexa as having a personality and possessing humanlike characteristics) was positively correlated with the intensity of PSRs that users developed with these virtual assistants. In turn, such PSRs were found to be psychologically beneficial, enhancing the users' subjective well-being (Noor et al, 2022).

Avatars. One type of ambiguous figure that has been studied in the context of PSRs is the avatar in a computer game. These relationships are quite different from most PSRs because the player has direct control over the actions of the avatar, and the avatar is often quite explicitly an idealized projected self. Studies suggested that game players form quite varied relationships with their avatars (Banks & Bowman, 2016; Jin & Park, 2009). Hartmann (2008) argued that authenticity perceived and distance are critical factors that influence the extent to which parasocial processes might enter into gameplay. A recent study of the game *Travel Frog* (Zhou, 2021) reported that players frequently relate to the titular frog as a child that satisfies felt parenting needs, perhaps in the same way that Michael Jackson substituted for absent children in the work of Stever (2009).

Nonanthropomorphized Commercial Entities. Finally, a mention must be made of PSRs with abstract entities such as brands and other nonanthropomorphized commercial entities. Kim and Kim (2018) argued that, if PSRs are possible with fictional characters, by extension we can describe our attachments to any inanimate object as PSRs. In their research, brands were found to elicit some parasocial processes, such as trust and loyalty, and that these were often tied to company initiatives such as sponsorships and positions

on ethical issues. Here, the role of imagination is important, as indeed is the use of brands for self-enhancement (Huang & Mitchell, 2014).

While one might be tempted to dismiss such applications of parasocial theory as misguided or as a failure to grasp the essential characteristics of the phenomenon, we should nonetheless be careful not to draw the boundaries of the parasocial too rigidly. Fan attachments are, as often as not, made with nonpersonalized entities such as TV series or pop groups, even if these are effectively collective PSRs with numerous individual figures. Like the Hydra, which grows a new head each time one of them is cut off, fans of pop groups are capable of transferring PSRs from a favorite departed band member on to the remaining ones (Duffett, 2014).

In conclusion, it seems that there is no single way of carving up the entire field of PSRs into different categories. We can try to organize them in terms of the media figures involved, though such models will usually incline toward a particular type of PSR. Tsay-Vogel and Schwartz (2014) argued that their taxonomy avoids the limitations of Giles (2002) by considering realism, but most of their examples are fictional characters. Likewise, Giles (2002) and taxonomies of celebrity fail to consider the different types of PSR with living humans (or, indeed, dead ones). Other subcategories of PSR focus on specific affective attachments (romantic, negative) or media contexts (digital, transmediated).

Parasocial Relationships and Rival or Alternative Concepts

In the first half of this chapter, I focused on the diversity of PSRs themselves and on the different ways we might classify them. In the second half I want to consider PSRs as part of a wider range of audience responses to media and how the concept relates to rival descriptions or explanations for audience behavior. Are PSRs the same thing as fandom? Is celebrity worship just a specific type of PSR, or is it a discrete category? Authors do not always distinguish these phenomena, often following the preferred terminology within their academic discipline or field of interest (parasocial theory has taken a while to catch on in social psychology, i.e., where the literature on celebrity worship is mainly located). I begin by looking at a number of psychological processes, such as identification and attachment, and how these overlap or interact with the parasocial. I then move on to more specific phenomena that straddle the border between media and the social: fandom, which has its own subdiscipline or field, fan studies.

Rival Psychological Processes

Before parasocial theory became widely cited in the 1980s, it was more common for researchers to explain audience relationships with media figures in terms of identification, a concept rooted in psychoanalytic theory, where it has been used to explain a variety of developmental phenomena (Wollheim, 1974). It has been embraced enthusiastically by film theorists, who use it to explain the perceptual experience of spectatorship, the camera functioning as the seeing eye of the viewer and inviting them to adopt a certain "gaze"

toward the characters (Mulvey, 1975). In communication, authors have distinguished different ways in which identification works in broader audience processes: Cohen (2001), for example, defined it as a cognitive and emotional empathy that occurs intermittently during the viewing of a film or TV show, while Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) differentiated this from a longer standing wish to emulate the target figure, a process they called "wishful identification."

Both Cohen (2001) and Brown (2015) have developed models of audience response that differentiate between PSI and identification. For Cohen (2001), identification is conceptually different from PSI because the latter implies responding to the media figure as an "other," while identification implies that the viewer is absorbing their identity; for Brown (2015), on the other hand, PSI acts as a predecessor for identification. We interact, then identify (or not). Cohen (2001) also distinguished "liking" and "imitation" as rival processes, capturing, respectively, evaluative and behavioral responses to the media figure. Brown's (2015) model also incorporates transportation, a process that may coincide with PSI, and "worship" as the potential outcome (in selected cases) of identification.

It is clear that PSI is not the only psychological process operating during the viewing of a film or TV show, and it is certainly important to distinguish between them. However it must be noted that, although they consider the potential long-term effects of such processes, these models deal largely with the act of viewing rather than the resulting PSR. They may also be limited to certain types of media experience, primarily film and TV.

Parasocial Attachment

A theoretical concept that is more directly related to longer term parasocial experience is that of parasocial attachment, another psychological process deriving in part from psychoanalytic theory (Bretherton, 1992). Initially rooted in the context of child–caregiver relationships, attachment theory was later developed as a life-span concept, whereby individuals can be differentiated in terms of their preferred attachment *styles* (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), which determine what kinds of adult relationships they seek out and derive satisfaction from. In a study by Cole and Leets (1999), it was found that these attachment styles were associated with different strengths of PSR with favorite media figures, with anxious–ambivalent participants scoring highest on the PSI scale and avoidant participants the lowest, broadly in correspondence with the pattern between attachment style and social relationships (see also Chapter 10 and Chapter 11).

Unlike the rival psychological concept of identification, it could be argued that attachment is a precondition for any kind of meaningful PSR (e.g., see Chapter 5 theorization of parasocial attachment occurring on highest stages of PSR development). Stever (2017) argued that it is a good way of framing PSRs as normative because both processes may be said to have evolutionary explanations: We attach to media figures for the same psychological reasons as we do any human (or human-like) animals, instinctively responding to faces, voices, and bodies regardless of whether these are mediated or physically proximate.

Because attachment is thereby conceived entirely at the level of the individual, there is a case for considering it a more accurate description of the phenomenon we are discussing in this book than one relying on the word *relationship*. Parasocial attachment is theorized to be experienced on higher levels of There is no measure specific to parasocial attachment in general. Erickson and Dal Cin (2018) offered a measure of romantic parasocial attachment (see also Box 4.11), although it is not clear how their operationalization of attachment is distinct from relationship.

Celebrity Worship

While identification might not be applicable to all PSRs, and attachment may simply be another way of framing PSRs, I think it is fair to say that celebrity worship is a largely descriptive concept that only accounts for a very small number of PSRs. However wide a definition of celebrity we agree on, most media users do not "worship" celebrities, and in much of the literature the term is used figuratively, at best as a proxy for religious ritual. The general idea is that, since celebrity worship is negatively associated with religiosity, it may be a contemporary manifestation of a universal human tendency (Maltby et al., 2002). Either way, the concept of worship is much more closely related to fandom than PSRs in general, and any confusion between the two is the legacy of the mistaken belief that PSRs are necessarily positive in nature. Whether or not "worship" is a fair description of fan activities, it is certainly irrelevant for the majority of PSRs.

PSR Versus Fandom

Although it could be argued fan relationships are just another subset or category of PSR, I have awarded them a separate section in this chapter because the various literatures on fandom and media audiences tend to treat them as distinctive phenomena, and there are (some) good reasons for doing so. The most important distinction is that fans self-identify as such, unlike general media users: By incorporating the fan object into their personal identity, they are doing more than entering into a PSR. Declaring oneself a fan forces the individual to reflect on the relationship, so in no sense can the PSR be unconscious or subconscious. Nevertheless, some descriptions of PSRs sound rather closer to fandom than PSRs as they are generally understood in the literature, with some researchers even asking participants if they "have a PSR" (and suggesting that such relationships are stigmatized) (Scherer et al., 2021, is a recent example). Another important point is that fandom does not necessarily attach itself to an individual media figure, which has significant implications for how it is represented psychologically.

Even more than PSRs, fan activities have been frequently associated with social dysfunction in both academia and mainstream media themselves. The frustration engendered by the pathologization of fandom has been influential in the evolution of fan studies as a discrete academic field (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992). Other than the frequently pathologizing literature of celebrity worship, psychological treatment of the phenomenon is

scarce, though Gayle Stever's important work (Stever, 2009) has established a useful framework for understanding fandom as a distinctive process that begins with general interest in media or celebrities rather than PSI with a specific figure. While extreme forms of fandom, especially those that result in stalking and other dysfunctional behavior, can be largely explained in relation to individual pathology, it is important to see fandom in general as an adaptive activity: one that is, through communal fan activity, associated more with social interaction than PSI (Stever, 2009, 2017).

In the context of fandom, we can see how the parasocial criterion of nonreciprocity has always been problematic. Unlike other media users, fans have formal channels that provide them, up to a certain point, with access to media figures. For certain types of fan, conventions and conferences have always allowed longer and more meaningful interaction with the media figures (fan objects) themselves, especially for those highest in the fan hierarchy, who may develop meaningful social relationships with them. Certainly, among the Josh Groban fans studied by Stever (2017), there were key individuals who were known to, and treated by, the singer as "valued acquaintances."

Even fans who lack the architecture of clubs and conventions can invest remarkable levels of energy and commitment in breaking down the barrier that separates the social from the parasocial and entering into, albeit peripherally, the public sphere. Garratt (1990) described how a fan of Adam and the Ants drummer Chris Hughes spent 110 days on the steps of the Abbey Road studios in London while he produced an album for another group. Despite being physically attracted to Hughes and desiring a romantic relationship, she eventually came to terms with his situation (he was in a long-term relationship), merely remaining "in contact" with Hughes. As Garratt (1990, p. 147) argued, such persistence "begs admiration in spite of its being so pointless and oppressive."

In the digital era, fans no longer need warm clothing and umbrellas to achieve the same degree of persistence, simply firing off innumerable tweets that have a reasonable chance, if only fleeting, of being seen by their addressee. Although several authors have dismissed social media as an opportunity for genuine interactivity between audiences and media figures, Stever and Hughes (2013) have documented instances of fan tweets being responded to, and through perusal of Twitter timelines it does not take long to find celebrities not only replying to fan tweets but also relaying fan tweets enthusiastically to their followers, much to the delight of their authors (Giles, 2018).

Because social media open channels of access that were previously in the hands of various gatekeepers (editors, fan clubs, burly security guards), a shift in status has also taken place that narrows the gap between audiences and media figures. Unless directly positioned as a fan (in a user biographical statement), it is not obvious which "followers" or "friends" of a social media profile constitute fans, and one can only make such judgments based on such details as follower numbers, authorized status (Twitter has a blue tick to indicate "authentic" accounts), and linguistic clues (form of address, content, etc.). This creates an "illusion of equality" for media users that weakens the fan identity (Wellman,

2021), although this very much depends on the degree of popularity the celebrity enjoys. As my own research on crime authors suggested (Giles, 2017), in the early stages on the path to success, certain types of fan such as "book bloggers" can rival the authors in terms of follower numbers and industry visibility.

Ultimately, fandom is an identity as well as an activity with distinctive behaviors (Stever, 2009) that, even during the broadcast media era, has allowed the boundary between the social and the parasocial to be penetrated without necessarily disturbing the difference in status between media users and media figures. The fact that fandom is not reducible to a simple subcategory of PSR indicates some of the limitations of a purely cognitive–affective theory of PSRs that I discuss in the next section.

Antifans and Critical Fans

It is equally possible that negative PSRs can be used for ego enhancement purposes, whereby a media user specifically targets a disliked figure in order to define themselves in opposition to them (also see Chapter 17). Wellman (2021) discussed this in the context of social media users who, as "followers" of a celebrity, are assumed to be fans, but instead post negative comments to/about the figure. Before the age of social media, such individuals had been described as "antifans" (Gray, 2003): not indifferent to the fan object, but committed to active hostility.

Long-standing fans can also be seen to turn on their idols when circumstances change: The singer Morrissey's notoriously fractious fan base is a good example of this (Giles, 2013). Here, the fans had bifurcated into two trenchant rival camps (represented as two separate fan forums) following a series of albums that were generally agreed to be substandard and an increasing number of controversial or offensive statements from the singer reported by the media. The point on which the fans disagreed was whether or not their love for Morrissey should be unconditional (as it might be for a blood relation), and if a "true fan" should be prepared to be honest rather than blindly sycophantic (like a parent constantly praising their child's accomplishments even when it is counterproductive). These ambivalent fans offer us a perfect illustration of the way PSRs reflect social relationships: neither wholly positive nor negative.

Borderline Parasocial Relationships

I want to conclude this chapter by returning to the gray zone between the social and parasocial and by considering relationships with media figures that do not fall into any of the categories discussed previously. Increasingly, researchers are identifying points of commonality on the parasocial/social border, such as the role of "imagined interaction" (Gleason et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2021), that has long been studied in social relationships, and as mentioned previously, the blurring of the border in social media has prompted researchers, albeit largely those focusing on digital interaction, to consider ways that the parasocial and social overlap (e.g., Kowert & Daniel, 2021).

I would like to conclude by citing some very interesting research on PSRs in what would normally be regarded as a social, or "real-world," context: the business environment. Liao et al. (2021) studied the PSRs that form between employees at various hierarchical levels in a variety of Chinese companies where organizational trust was found to play an important part in the relationships between middle managers and chief executive officers (CEOs). These lower ranking employees had never met the executives and so had not formed reciprocal social relationships with them, yet, like citizens of a country toward their politicians and leaders, it was impossible for the middle managers not to form parasocial attachments to the CEOs in their professional context.

While this kind of application of parasocial theory to social contexts might be regarded by some media and communication scholars as stretching the net too far, it clearly constitutes another example of the brittle boundary between the parasocial and the social. Furthermore, one could argue that the CEO/manager PSRs are, like other vertical employee relationships in today's society, always partially mediated through company videos and other electronic communication. Ultimately, separating the social too rigidly from the parasocial is as pointless as drawing a firm line between the offline and the online. The digital landscape of modern society demands that contemporary media theory is sensitive to the importance of context.

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CHAPTER 3

Three Conceptual Challenges to Parasocial Interaction: Anticipated Responses, Implicit Address, and the Interactivity Problem

Tilo Hartmann

Abstract

This chapter takes a close look at the conceptualization of parasocial interaction (PSI), that is, users' illusionary experience, during media exposure, of being in a reciprocal social interaction with a media performer (while objectively this is not the case). The chapter discusses existing conceptual challenges and boundary conditions and proposes future research avenues. A review of PSI theory reveals that a performer's anticipated user response and implicit forms of address have been neglected in empirical research to date. The biggest conceptual challenge to the PSI concept, however, poses the "interactivity problem." Do user interactions with online performers (influencers, streamers, etc.) and other characters in (at least partially) interactive settings still qualify as PSI? The chapter proposes that the concept can still be applied under certain conditions. PSI can be germane to interactive modalities if an individual user (a) feels like being in a reciprocal interaction with the performer; (b) feels like being directly personally addressed by the performer; and (c) feels as if the interaction is reciprocally intimate—while it can be demonstrated that these three qualities are objectively not true.

Key Words: interactivity, new media, social media, intimacy, addressing, influencer

Introduction

Parasocial interaction (PSI) is a concept that dates back to the work of Horton and Wohl in 1956. These scholars were interested in understanding how viewers experience television—a novel mass medium in the 1950s. In their seminal essay, Horton and Wohl focused on newly emerging TV personalities, called personae, like news anchors or show masters. The scholars were fascinated by the phenomenon that viewers felt intimate with these personae and could even feel as if they knew them personally, although they only encountered them on the TV screen. In their essay, Horton and Wohl proposed that PSI lies at the heart of this intimate bond that viewers establish to personae.

The typical media use situation in which PSI can occur is marked by a lack of effective reciprocity between the audience members and the media performer. At the heart of the

PSI concept lies the idea that users can have the subjective *illusionary* feeling or perception of being in a reciprocal social interaction, while objectively this is not the case. However, while this definition at first appeared to be intuitive and sufficient, the development and expansion of interactive media platforms over the past decades challenged some of these assumptions. A central theoretical question is if the PSI concept can be applied to actual interactive settings at all and if the concept helps illuminate users' (seeming) interactions with a wide range of media characters, from fictional video game characters to online performers on Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, or Twitch (e.g., Wulf et al., 2021).

The present chapter focuses on the PSI concept, reviews its essence, and highlights potential conceptual challenges and significant open research questions, with a particular focus on the "interactivity problem." The chapter seeks to provide a better general understanding of PSI; explain to what extent the PSI concept can be applied to interactive media settings; and encourage related empirically driven PSI theory building. To this end, the chapter begins with carefully reconsidering Horton and Wohl's (1956) original conceptualization of PSI, explicating the theoretical components and characteristics of the interaction, its experiences, and its underlying processes. It then tests these notions against the contemporary media environments, considering how (if at all) PSI can be applied to these situations. Next, the chapter outlines three criteria that can be applied to establish the applicability of PSIs to a given media situation. Finally, the chapter concludes with directions for future PSI research and theory development.

Defining Parasocial Interaction

Horton and Wohl defined PSI as a "simulacrum of conversational give-and-take" (1956, p. 215) between viewers and personae. Their core argument was that TV exposure lacks reciprocity or true interactivity between personae and viewers because personae cannot observe, and thus cannot truly respond to, their viewers. PSI, therefore, is "one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development" (p. 215). However, Horton and Wohl considered anchors or show masters as performers who pretend to interact with viewers at home. Viewers can accept a persona's offer to interact and thus step into a seeming social interaction. In this case, viewers can experience the "parasocial interaction as immediate, personal, and reciprocal, but these qualities are illusory and are presumably not shared by the speaker" (Horton & Strauss, 1957, p. 580).

Horton and Wohl (1956) argued that this core of PSI (i.e., a simulacrum of give-and-take despite an objective lack of reciprocity) requires a well-calibrated interplay of a human performer and viewers at home. The human performer must address the audience in the right way (persona: "Hey there, nice to see you again this evening!") and add well-timed pauses to let the audience at home respond (viewers, internally: "Well, hello again"). The performer then has to correctly infer the responses of the invisible audience at home and adapt the performance accordingly (persona: "OK, are you ready for this show?"). Viewers, in turn, must accept the invitation of the performer to seemingly

interact. According to Horton and Wohl, if both the persona's performance and the viewers' responses match, the lack of reciprocity is bridged, at least in viewers' experience, making way for a seemingly full-blown social interaction or conversational give-and-take. In summary, according to Horton and Wohl (1956), if the media performer addresses viewers and invites them with gestures and remarks the right way, and if viewers willingly accept this interaction offer and play the corresponding part of the receiver, they might experience the interaction as reciprocal although it is not.

In an attempt to further explicate this central idea of Horton and Wohl (1956), Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) suggested understanding PSI as a specific *experience* in which viewers have the illusion of being in a reciprocal social interaction with somebody on the screen although they are not in an interaction. Accordingly, it is important to note that in its original version and due to the attempt to closely follow Horton and Wohl's (1956) initial arguments, Hartmann and Goldhoorn's (2011) concept of parasocial experience only applies to noninteractive situations that, from an outsider's (or an objective) point of view, lack reciprocity between a media character and their viewers. Accordingly, if following this original conceptualization of parasocial experience, interactions in *actual* reciprocal situations (e.g., among not only two people in a phone or video chat, but also streamers or influencers communicating with followers via Instagram, YouTube, or Twitch) would not qualify as situations triggering *para*social interaction. Rather, these should be considered situations that involve (computer-mediated) communication.

In their seminal essay, Horton and Wohl focused particularly on human newscasters and news anchors appearing on TV. However, they also hinted at the fact that "fictional characters, sometimes even . . . puppets anthropomorphically transformed into 'personalities'" (1956, p. 216) might qualify as personae. Today, most scholars agree that, in principle, any mediated entity that is perceived as social, and is encountered in a nonreciprocal situation, might trigger a parasocial experience in viewers. However, importantly, to trigger parasocial experiences, viewers must not only perceive a mediated entity to be social, but also feel *observed* and *addressed* by this entity. Feeling addressed is important because (as already Horton and Wohl, 1956, remarked) PSI requires more than mere running observation of another social entity.

Notably, feeling addressed is central to the understanding of PSI offered by Horton and Wohl (1956), as well as in Hartmann and Goldhoorn's (2011) conceptualization of the experience of parasocial interaction (EPSI). However, addressing plays a less crucial role in other interpretations of PSI (Klimmt et al., 2006; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008) that more broadly focus on person perception, that is, users' observation of a media entity, and associated experiences. According to this rival view, forming an impression about a person that users observe on a screen, or users' general affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses triggered by observing a person on a screen, *may* be intensified by also feeling personally addressed by this person (Klimmt et al., 2006). But being addressed is not a *necessary* factor to form an impression of, or respond in various ways to, an observed

person. In contrast, the illusionary feeling of being in a reciprocal social interaction indeed requires that the other's observed behavior seems at least mindful of, if not explicitly directed toward, one's own presence.

To emphasize this difference in interpretations of PSI, Hartmann (2008) distinguished PSI as paracommunication (later addressed as EPSI) from PSI as an observation (later addressed as parasocial processing):

> Paracommunication [EPSI] is likely if users think that the mediated character performs symbolic behaviour towards them and is aware of or at least anticipates their social reactions. If these requirements are not met, the parasocial interaction might take more simple forms, like (automatic or elaborate) processes known from person perception. (p. 181)

Schramm and Hartmann (2008) echoed this distinction of two different interpretations of the PSI concept when they defined parasocial processing as "captur[ing] all kinds of users' responses towards personae, regardless of whether users have or do not have the feeling that the personae adjust their behavior towards their presence" (p. 387). Accordingly, scholars started interpreting PSI differently, either as the illusionary sensation of being in a social interaction (EPSI; Hartmann and Goldhoorn, 2011), which requires feeling addressed by the other, or by focusing on PSI as observation and person perception, which does not require feeling addressed (Klimmt et al., 2006).

Emphasizing the importance of being addressed for PSI, Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) argued that the mediated other's "body posture and the direction of his or her face and eyes, as well as verbal inclusions of the audience, are crucial for the initiation and maintenance of viewers' parasocial experiences" (p. 1116). According to Hartmann and Goldhoorn, if viewers perceive an entity as social, they are likely to engage in automatic mind reading in order to more fully understand the perceived social agent. If they feel addressed, mind reading can trigger the intuitive feeling of being in a social interaction with the depicted social entity. Building on Goffman's influential work on social interaction (1963), Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) argued that in these cases users can get the intuitive feeling of being in a reciprocal social interaction consisting of a sense of mutual awareness, mutual attention, and mutual behavioral adjustment with the character on the screen. The idea, which can be disputed, is that all three aspects commonly co-occur and jointly define PSI as a latent construct.

Anticipated Audience Responses

It is noteworthy that Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011), in contrast to Horton and Wohl's (1956) original approach, stay silent about the performer's anticipation of the audience response and the necessity of performers to adapt their behavior to this anticipated response. One might indeed argue that triggering the illusion of a fully reciprocal interaction (where audience members also feel that they can "give," and not just "take,"

in the simulacrum of give-and-take), requires this anticipation and adjustment among the performer. An alternative argument, perhaps implied by Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011), could be that if viewers already feel that a media performer is aware of them (mutual awareness), and even explicitly addressing and observing them (mutual attention), they also will be inclined to feel that the performer adapts to their own responses even if the performer is not trying to guess these responses and is not adapting her or his behavior accordingly. Empirical evidence for this can be found in the validation of the six-item EPSI scale (see Chapter 4 in this volume and Box 4.15 for the full scale) that assesses all three types of mutuality with a performer. Past studies (e.g., Dibble et al., 2016) usually confirmed the unidimensional structure of this measure. At the same time, however, across samples, respondents usually agree least with the EPSI scale's final item, "I had the feeling that ... X reacted to what I said or did" (see also Dibble et al., 2016). Accordingly, future studies should take a closer look at the extent a performer's inclusion of (anticipated) audience responses is required in triggering a full-blown parasocial experience, as Horton and Wohl (1956) initially suggested. This important conceptual feature of PSI has been neglected in past research.

Implicit Addressing

Another lingering problem that seems to be not often discussed is that PSI requires that users are addressed by characters. However, most media figures never directly address their audience. Nonfictional performers might occasionally explicitly show they are mindful of the audience's presence (by greeting the audience or gazing into the camera), but just as often they might have turned their attentional focus onto other people in their environment (e.g., an interviewed person). And most fictional characters never seem to "break the fourth wall." While fictional characters in video games and other interactive settings like virtual reality applications (which are populated by agents and avatars; Fox et al., 2015) allow for truly reciprocal and thus nonparasocial interaction with users, in noninteractive settings like television or movies most fictional characters almost never directly look into the camera, turn their body toward the audience, or verbally address the audience. Should PSI then only be applied to analyze nonfictional TV characters (in line with Horton and Wohl's, 1956, original personae) and the few instances where fictional characters break the fourth wall, like Frank Underwood in the drama series *House of Cards*?

To answer this question we need to better define what we mean by saying that a user is addressed or feels addressed (see also "parasociability," Cohen, 2009). What addressing entails is a difficult question in its own right. Direct address, which has been considered a central trigger of PSI, only focuses on the tip of the iceberg by discussing the most explicit and observable forms of being addressed. But human beings, as soon as they perceive another "mind" (or social being) in their surroundings, engage in automatic mind-reading activities to understand the attentional focus or perspective and intentions of the other (Frischen et al., 2007; Klein et al., 2009; Redcay & Schilbach, 2019). From thereon,

social signals, including "facial expression, body posture, and verbal and nonverbal vocal information" (Stoyanova et al., 2010, p. 1765), determine to what extent observers feel that the other is mutually aware and mindful of their presence or might even explicitly turn attention toward them (e.g., indicated by directed sensory organs). Accordingly, being addressed and feeling addressed might not constitute a binary phenomenon, but represent a continuum. For example, people might already feel somewhat addressed by the behavior of another person waiting at the bus stop if they believe that the other person is mutually aware. The reason is that in this case the other person's behavior partly has to be interpreted as a public performance (see "unfocused interaction," Goffman, 1963). However, if this person would suddenly turn her or his body toward another waiting person and address this person also vocally, "You!", clearly that other person would feel more directly addressed (see "focused interaction," Goffman, 1963).

To date, PSI scholars mostly focused on whether users are directly addressed, or not at all addressed, by a media performer. Thus, they potentially overlooked subtler degrees of address. For example, media performers may also indirectly address their viewers, assigning parasocial roles such as ratified listeners or overhearers (e.g., Dynel, 2011). A typical example of where viewers might be indirectly addressed by nonfictional media personalities includes interviews (e.g., on the news or a talk show). Although none of the media personalities looks into the camera, the viewer nonetheless might feel included in the conversation because the people on the screen mind the viewer in their social setting. However, to what extent viewers experience PSI while watching interviews or related situations in which they are not directly addressed has not yet been examined to date.

Mikos (1996) took the idea of implicit address a step further by arguing that, similar to how the audience perceives actors in a theater, viewers may perceive most people on the screen as people performing on stage and thus consciously in front of an audience (see also Dynel, 2011). If true, viewers may routinely, at least implicitly, feel addressed by all characters that they think knowingly appear in public or on a screen. Imagine, for instance, that viewers watch a video of a person that is drinking a cup of coffee. If viewers would believe that the person was aware of being recorded for this video, and thus of having an audience and acting in public, they might feel implicitly addressed by the displayed person and experience PSI. In contrast, if viewers were convinced that the displayed person was unaware of being recorded or displayed in public (e.g., if the video was recorded by a surveillance camera), they might not feel addressed or experience PSI.

If these arguments extend to fictional characters remains an open research question. The idea of implicit addressing implies that viewers recruit their general media knowledge to interpret media encounters. In the above example, people would need to recall things like "people recorded by a surveillance camera are unaware of being recorded and thus do not perform" or that "knowingly recorded people publicly perform for an imagined audience." Accordingly, these interpretations eventually affect whether or not viewers experience PSI. Potentially, however, viewers might consider fictional characters

as unconscious beings that cannot be aware of performing in front of an audience. If true, perhaps viewers won't feel implicitly addressed by a publicly appearing fictional character. If fictional characters directly address their viewers, perhaps visible cues like eye gazing that trigger hardwired social reactions might momentarily override better knowledge and thus trigger EPSI. But in the absence of direct address and related visible cues, perhaps viewers' awareness that a fictional character cannot be aware of performing in public might diminish the sensation of being implicitly addressed, and thus diminish related experiences of PSI.

In summary, these ideas suggest that it might be a fruitful avenue for future PSI research to distinguish degrees of users being and feeling addressed by nonfictional and fictional characters. Potentially, viewers' interpretation that the other is "performing for them" might already make them feel addressed. Additional subtle interaction cues (like minding a viewers' presence in a social interaction setting like a televised interview) might further intensify the feeling of being implicitly addressed. More visible and directed verbal and bodily cues could make the addressing more explicit. Addressing, in turn, should trigger a sense of PSI among viewers, at least as a sense of mutual awareness, and, for the more explicit forms of address, also as a sense of mutual attention. As discussed above, viewers' sense of mutual behavioral adjustment, however, might be relatively weak even if viewers are directly addressed by a performer. Accordingly, it remains more speculative if a sense of mutual behavioral adjustment is triggered by implicit forms of addressing (unless perhaps, as discussed, performers would also anticipate viewers' responses and adapt their behavior). Future research is required to more fully illuminate how PSI is affected by these gradual differences in addressing.

The Problem With Interactive Media

While a performer's anticipated audience response and forms of implicit address pose important open research questions that lie at the heart of PSI theorizing, both issues originate from thinking about PSI in noninteractive media exposure situations like watching TV (or YouTube clips) or listening to the radio (or podcasts). However, probably the most pressing open research question about, if not conceptual challenge for, the PSI concept arises from now ubiquitous interactive media. One might argue that PSI does not apply to the myriad occasions of (computer-)mediated interaction simply because in these cases the situation objectively is reciprocal, and thus it is unclear why one should speak of illusionary, seeming, or *para*social interaction at all (Hartmann, 2008, 2016; Stever & Lawson, 2013). If true, this argument would imply that the PSI concept cannot be applied, or at least would lose its unique explanatory power, in examining timely research questions such as how streamers, influencers, bloggers, vloggers, or microcelebrities (in short: online performers[1]) interact with their followers and develop a sense of intimacy (e.g., Kim & Song, 2016; Kowert & Daniel, 2021; Lee & Jang, 2013; Lee & Shin, 2012; Stever & Lawson, 2013). If PSI is about the illusion of being in a reciprocal social

interaction while one is not, one might indeed wonder what the concept still has to offer when users actually are reciprocally involved with media personalities.

The great majority of theoretical and empirical work in the area of online performers, even when using the term PSI, focuses on parasocial relationships (PSRs) and more enduring bonds of intimacy that develop between online performers and followers (e.g., Labrecque, 2014). Conceptual discussions of PSI in interactive settings are rare (but see Lee, 2020). Accordingly, the interactivity problem has not yet been sufficiently explicated and addressed in the PSI literature. Perhaps a good way to tackle this problem is to ask what the prefix "para" in PSI, which denotes that some part of the interaction is illusionary, could imply in interactive settings. For example, what elements or aspects of an interpersonal, directed, and fully reciprocal face-to-face social interaction with another human being might be lacking or might at least differ in the mediated social interaction that is taking place between online performers and their followers? And to what extent might users have the illusion that these missing or differing aspects would nevertheless "seemingly" exist?

It might be productive to discuss only aspects that are closely tied to the PSI concept (i.e., users' illusionary sensation of being in a personal reciprocal interaction). Accordingly, perhaps the most fruitful way to tackle the interactivity problem is to look at instances when users feel like being in a reciprocal, personal, and intimate social interaction with an online performer, while actually (or objectively) the interaction is less reciprocal, personal, and intimate than it seems.

Para, Because Interaction Is Perceived as Fully Reciprocal (While It Is Not)

Horton and Wohl (1956) noted that TV personae take the greatest pains to create an illusion of intimacy. "The persona tries as far as possible to eradicate, or at least to blur, the line which divides him and his show, as a formal performance, from the audience both in the studio and at home" (p. 217). Online performers seem to share, if not further advance, this striving for intimacy. For example, Abidin (2015, p. 7) argued that "the allure of influencers is premised on the ways they engage with their followers to give the impression of exclusive, intimate exchange." Online performers use different forms of mass personal communication (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018), combining public communication directed at many (e.g., a tweet or a public video post) or individual users (e.g., liking a follower's comment, responding to a follower's input in a chat or via a video), both via synchronous and asynchronous channels, to create and maintain a basis of followers that, over time, feels intimate and close to them, making the performer at times appear as close to followers as a good sibling or friend.

Lou (2022) suggested addressing the relationships between online performers and followers as trans-PSRs. Lou argued that these trans-PSRs are different from one-sided and hierarchical PSRs (e.g., to a TV celebrity) in two important ways. First, trans-PSRs are characterized by a stronger sense of collective reciprocity. For instance, in trans-PSRs,

the performer seems generally responsive to the community of followers, and individual followers believe that in principle the performer would also respond to them individually (Dai & Walther, 2018). Second, trans-PSRs have greater asynchronous interactivity, such as via polls and online comments. Finally, trans-PSRs facilitate cocreation wherein the media personality generates content in collaboration with, or based on direct input from, followers. For instance, performers pick up suggestions from followers and curate their content respectively. "Collectively, the relation between influencers and followers, from the influencers' perspective, have been found to be more interactive, bidirectional, co-constructed, and intimate than what the notion of parasocial relation has originally encompassed" (p. 4).

What do these PSR features imply for PSI? At first glance, the individual follower or user indeed appears to be in a reciprocal situation with the online performer, yet this notion might be challenged. Performers often encourage followers to respond and submit feedback, (e.g., via sharing comments, participating in polls, or uploading their own content). Some, yet by far not all, followers actively respond to these requests of online performers or respond to whatever the online performer displayed before (see "semi PSIs," Thelwall et al., 2022). However, "[Performer–follower] interaction is most likely to be asymmetrical in nature, with the vast majority of 'followers' . . . silently listening to the [performer's] personal reports" (Lee & Jang, 2013, p. 47). Online performers try hard to respond to users' feedback by replying to individual comments, adding smileys or other signs of appreciation (Dai & Walther, 2018), or even producing content like new clips in reply to users' comments (Abidin, 2015; Lou, 2022; Xu et al., 2022). However, being a (successful) online performer is an effortful job, and interacting with users requires resources. The sheer volume of users' reactions, even if only a fraction provides input, might make it inevitable for online performers to pick a few responses that receive answers, while many others go unanswered.

If only a few of all followers reach out to their online performer, and if only a few of those replies receive a reply again from the performer, clearly the conversational give-and-take between performer and the whole group of followers seems patchy. Potentially then (and this is a testable hypothesis), from an objective perspective, for most followers there is no true interaction or "lived" reciprocity. Instead, perhaps within the community of followers each individual follower only feels as if one was in a reciprocal interaction with the online performer (Dai & Walther, 2018; Kreissl et al., 2021; Lee, 2020; Lou, 2022). In this case, the concept of PSI would apply very well to those that actually do not interact with the performer during exposure (e.g., when watching a YouTube clip or Twitch stream or checking the performer's Instagram account), but feel nevertheless as if being in a reciprocal social interaction with the online performer (Dai & Walther, 2018, "parasocial intimacy"; Lee, 2020, "authenticity of interaction"; Lee & Shin, 2012, "social presence"; Wulf et al., 2021, "parasocial experience"; Xu et al., 2022, "perceived reciprocity").

More specifically, although this remains speculative, one might argue that followers, if exposed to their online performer, might not experience the performer idiosyncratically, but rather as a member of the group of followers. For example, according to the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE, Postmes et al., 1998, 2001), a more salient social identity causes deindividuation among online users in the sense that they align their behavior not with their idiosyncratic values but with momentarily prevalent group norms. In the context of online performers, in the exposure situation, usually other followers are copresent, too, and their interaction with the performer is observable to the individual user (e.g., in live chats, or comments). Although speculative, one might wonder if under these conditions individual users might also become immersed into something like a collective experience, where what happens to other group members might be almost equally felt by each individual member or where each individual member might feel ownership about what other members do (Neville & Reicher, 2011).

To provide an analogy, audiences of a live music concert might feel as a crowd, and individuals might become immersed in the collective to such an extent that perhaps if the performer on stage reaches out to one audience member, almost everybody else feels addressed, too. Perhaps then, followers, if exposed to their online performer (and several other followers), can also have these vicarious experiences within a group, where what other followers do and what happens to other followers almost feels as if they do it themselves or it is happening to them directly. A closely related experimental study by Dai and Walther (2018) showed that users can indeed feel more intimate with an online performer (i.e., judge a performer to be a more intimate acquaintance) just by observing *other* users interacting with the performer. It is worth exploring if this effect extends to true parasocial experiences, that is, where followers feel as if being in a reciprocal interaction with a performer although they are not (because only other followers are—and these few of course would not qualify as being in a PSI, at least not if the PSI would be about the *illusion* of being in a reciprocal interaction). If this argument is applied to measures like the EPSI scale, for example, it could be that we observe a transfer from (or correlation between) "we" to "I," such as that respondents' agreement with items like "the performer was aware of us, paid attention to us, responded to us" (all of which might be objectively correct) transforms into (or correlates with) agreement to items like "the performer was aware of me, paid attention to me, responded to me," potentially indicating an illusionary and parasocial experience.

What factors exactly trigger PSI under these circumstances remains largely unclear. Collective address might be an important factor. In a study by Wulf et al. (2021), a Twitch performer posted a "thank you for watching" chat message either addressing all the users collectively or addressing them personally by including their assigned username. These conditions were compared to a no-address control condition. Twitch users (correctly) felt most strongly reciprocally involved with the performer if they were personally addressed. This sensation, however, might not qualify as a parasocial experience, as there seems to

be nothing illusionary about it. Rather, users reported their accurate sensation of being part of a social computer-mediated interaction. However, importantly, users who were collectively addressed also felt reciprocally involved, and significantly more so than if the performer did not address them at all. One could argue that users' subjective sensation of being individually reciprocally involved with a performer, while they were objectively only collectively addressed, is illusionary. Accordingly, this finding might suggest that collective forms of address might suffice in triggering PSI as an illusionary sense of being in a personal reciprocal interaction with a performer.

Next to collective addressing, observing that *other* users interact with the performer (e.g., post a comment, or post a comment and also receive a reply) might trigger PSI. For example, in a study by Lee and Shin (2012), shy Twitter followers felt a stronger sense of social presence (a concept whose measurement was almost identical to the EPSI scale) with a performer just by observing that the performer responded on followers' versus largely ignored followers' tweets. Similarly, in the Twitch study by Wulf et al. (2021), respondents reported stronger EPSI simply by observing the online performer paying attention to the chat and replying to user postings, as compared to the performer largely ignoring the chat. Accordingly, in line with the idea that users might be immersed in a collective experience, observing performer–user interaction might already trigger a subjective sense of being personally involved in a social interaction with the performer.

Users' illusion that they are in a personal reciprocal interaction with an online performer, although they are not, might be the most essential indicator of PSI in interactive modalities. However, followers, when exposed to their online performer, might also maintain two other closely related illusions that identify PSI because they align well with the concept, even in its original explication. First, next to feeling like being in a reciprocal interaction (while they are not), users might also feel that they are directly and personally addressed by a performer (although they are not). In fact, this aspect seems closely tied to the illusion of reciprocity. If an individual feels personally singled out and addressed by somebody (although the individual is not), the individual might automatically also feel like being in a reciprocal encounter with the other (although the individual is not). Second, individual users might have the illusion that the encounter is mutually intimate, while the intimacy an individual users feels toward the performer is actually not shared with the performer. Together with the illusionary perception of reciprocity, these two illusions might qualify PSI in generally interactive conditions.

Para, Because Interaction Is Perceived as Personally Directed (While It Is Not)

While the illusion of reciprocity might define the core of PSI in interactive modalities, it might be closely associated with, if not triggered by, the illusion of being directly and personally addressed by a performer. Direct and personal address implies that a message is specifically meant for a single addressee and potentially exclusively for this addressee alone ("personalization," O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018, p. 1166). Directing a message to a

receiver is usually reached by addressing someone by name or, in spatial settings, by turning the face and body toward the addressee (Macrae et al., 2002). However, due to limited resources, performers might often resort to addressing the whole group collectively rather than (each) individual follower ("I love you," with "you" meaning all the viewers or readers of the message). Furthermore, as noted before, even if addressing individual followers (e.g., by calling out names in livestreaming sessions or by responding to individual comments), performers might only be able to address a few members out of the whole group of followers. Therefore, there is a high chance that individual followers are only indirectly addressed, either because the performer addresses the group or because followers only observe how other individual followers are addressed by the performer. In this case, users might nevertheless feel as if the performer would be addressing them individually and personally. As said, this illusion of being personally addressed, and of being in the spotlight of another's attention, somehow implies that one also experiences the encounter as reciprocal. Feeling personally addressed seems intertwined with perceiving the observed other as aware of one's presence (mutual awareness) and paying attention to one's presence (mutual attention).

Note that feeling personally addressed (while one is not) is actually not novel to online situations. Horton and Strauss (1957, p. 580) already argued that in "face-to-face situations a relationship is likely to become parasocial when an audience is so large that a speaker cannot address its members individually," presumably because individual members might feel personally addressed even if they are not. In nonmediated situations involving larger audiences (e.g., a pop concert or a lecture in a classroom), individuals might feel individually addressed by a performer although the performer only collectively addresses the audience. The same phenomenon might also occur in mediated situations. In this context, Goffman (1981), for example, referred to the radio announcer's direct mode: "The announcer ostensibly speaks to the audience alone, and, in a sense, speaks as if each individual hearer were the only one"(p. 234). These remarks suggest that also in other modalities people can feel like being personally addressed, although they are not. In this sense, people might feel that a performer is really mutually aware and attentive (to their individual presence and existence), while the performer actually is not.

Para, Because Interaction Is Perceived as Reciprocally Intimate (While It Is Not)

Building on the illusion of reciprocity and direct, personal address, followers might also feel that the (seeming) interaction with the online performer is reciprocally intimate, while the level of intimacy is actually asymmetric (e.g., Dai & Walther, 2018). Abidin (2015) argued that "influencers . . . present the illusion of an intimate sharing (i.e. a carefully arranged 'just got out of bed' selfie)." At the same time, according to Abidin (2015), the "intimacies negotiated are impressions that are felt by followers as opposed to whether or not these intimacies are actually 'authentic' or 'genuine'." Accordingly, users might

be prone to maintain an illusion of mutually shared intimacy, and this illusion might be fueled by their (erroneous) perception of being personally addressed by a performer and part of a reciprocal encounter.

Online performers are taking the greatest pains to create intimacy with their followers (e.g., by regularly sharing seemingly unedited insights into their private life and by appreciating followers' responses, etc.). Still, if intimacy is about levels of closeness (Lin et al., 2016), it is likely that during exposure to an online performer an individual follower feels closer to the performer than the performer feels close to this individual follower. A simple argument for this asymmetric sense of intimacy is that the performer likely is unaware of every single follower's existence or presence (Dai & Walther, 2018). Followers might have the feeling of being in a social interaction with the performer (although they are not). If, at the same time, the performer is actually unaware of their presence, they will of course feel that this seeming interaction is more reciprocally intimate than it actually is.

Even if the performer would, perhaps accidentally or triggered by a follower's input, become aware of the follower's presence, and even if an actual reciprocal interaction might follow, it seems unlikely that the performer experiences the same strength of intimacy (e.g., emotional intensity, trust) in this interaction as the follower does. Performers always have to divide not only their attention, but also their emotional affection onto many, whereas followers can bundle and focus their attention and affect on a single performer. Therefore, it is likely that followers know much more about the performer (Lin et al., 2016) than the performer knows about the individual follower. And if affection is a limited resource, perhaps undivided affection is also different from affection devoted to many. The online performer, perhaps extrapolating from insights gained from the few more intimate and reciprocal exchanges with followers, will have to apply a rougher, more stereotypical or generalized notion of the average individual follower, even in actually reciprocal individual encounters. The performer's intimacy might be restricted by this rough sketch of the other, whereas in actual or only imagined interactions the follower applies a much more fine-grained and detailed picture of the other, which potentially allows for a stronger and more genuine sense of intimacy.

Accordingly, one might argue that the actual felt level of intimacy and closeness between a performer and follower often is asymmetrical. However, followers might still believe that their encounters with a performer are equally mutually intimate. This illusion of reciprocal intimacy might represent another facet of a PSI in interactive online settings. As said, the illusion of reciprocal intimacy might follow from, or seem intertwined with, the illusion of being in a reciprocal encounter and of being personally addressed by a performer. Accordingly, all three aspects might naturally co-occur and together define PSI, even in interactive modalities (yet objectively nonreciprocal and nonpersonal performer–follower situations).

Not PSI, But Human–Computer Interaction or Computer-Mediated Communication

If PSI is about the illusion of being in a social interaction while one is not, it is tempting to argue that the parasocial nature of the interaction might also lie in recognizing the other as social (while she or he is not). This aspect would differ from the already addressed three aspects of PSI that dealt with users' experience that the interaction is reciprocal or personal (while it is not). Should, for example, users' interaction with a chatbot qualify as a parasocial encounter? Would users experience PSI if interacting with the chatbot? Such a view might inflate the PSI concept and also threaten to misuse the PSI label for already well-established other phenomena and existing research lines. More specifically, for two reasons, scholars should not address any encounter, interactive or not, with an actually nonsocial or nonliving entity as parasocial, simply because users perceive the entity as social.

First, the extent users perceive even nonsocial agents to be social has already been extensively studied in non-PSI literature, like research about why people perceive another object to be just either a dead object or an animate, alive object (conscious state attribution; Arico et al., 2011) that might have a mind (mind perception; Gray et al., 2007) and even share human qualities (anthropomorphism; Epley et al., 2007). Related non-PSI research already revealed related factors that predict if a displayed entity is perceived as social and hence could trigger a social interaction response mode (Redcay & Schilbach, 2019). Accordingly, the PSI concept does not seem necessary or appropriate when addressing the question when and why users perceive an encounter as social even in objectively nonsocial encounters.

Second, since Horton and Wohl's (1956) original formulation, the objective lack of reciprocity is central to the definition of PSI. Dropping this defining aspect threatens the validity of the concept and risks blurring the boundaries of the concept. This is particularly true because objectively reciprocal mediated interaction or communication with real or fictional others is already addressed in well-established fields, commonly without applying the PSI label. Human–computer interaction (HCI) scholars examine users' interaction with artificial (technology-enabled or computer-simulated) entities like smart speakers, chatbots, robots, or computer-controlled virtual agents or video game characters. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) scholars examine human-to-human interaction (e.g., via text chat, voice, or user-controlled avatars). Claiming that this massive body of literature represents PSI research simply because scholars examine "seemingly social" interactions would clearly imply overstretching the PSI concept. Accordingly, research on, for example, users' interaction with smart speakers or robots represents HCI or CMC rather than PSI research.

Conclusion and Methodological Implications

The present chapter took a closer look at the theory underlying PSI in order to discuss prevailing conceptual challenges, highlight open research questions, and call for respective

future research. The discussion emphasized three conceptual challenges and related research gaps that, if tackled, could not only provide a better understanding of how PSI works, but also help understanding the scope of PSI and assessing the breadth of situations to which the concept applies. First, in nonreciprocal mediated situations like watching TV or YouTube clips, we know currently little if or to what extent performers anticipate the responses of the unseen audience, how they adapt their behavior accordingly, and how this might affect users' parasocial experience. Second, we know little so far about the types and effects of a performer's implicit forms of address (e.g., if a performer is in an interview situation or a fictional character does not look into the camera). Do these situations also trigger the illusionary experience of being in a social interaction? Third, maybe the biggest challenge and open research question is to what extent PSI validly applies to, and could take place in, situations (or in modalities) that are generally interactive. This is a relevant and timely question because a growing amount of users encounter media personalities primarily online, under generally interactive conditions.

The present chapter proposes three solutions to this interactivity problem. All of them imply that for certain individual users the situation might appear more reciprocal than it actually is. PSI still applies if an individual user (1) feels like being in a reciprocal situation with an online performer, although she or he is not; or (2) feels personally and individually addressed by the online performer, although she or he is not; or (3) feels that the intimacy is reciprocally shared by the online performer, although it is not (or to a lesser extent). The first aspect might represent the essence of PSI, while the other two closely related aspects might highlight additional facets of a parasocial experience under generally interactive conditions. Future research could illuminate if, as proposed, all three aspects generally co-occur (and perhaps therefore jointly characterize a latent concept), or if they address mostly unrelated occurrences of PSI.

Future research on PSI that would follow the present considerations will also face new methodological challenges. Studying PSI in traditional settings like TV has the advantage that certain factors are fixed. For example, it is clear that the performer cannot observe or directly address any audience member, and that no audience member can reply in the exposure situation to the performer. Showing that users, under these conditions, might nevertheless feel like being in a social interaction with the performer is nonintuitive, and thus interesting and informative. And examining it is comparatively easy because all audience members operate under the same conditions. Accordingly, scholars do not have to further specify or distinguish individuals in a sample of, for example, people that watched the episode of a TV series, but could simply argue that everybody was in the same situation. However, factors such as who is directly addressed or responds to a performer in an exposure situation vary a lot more under generally interactive conditions, making it harder to judge who takes part in, or experiences, PSI versus actual (mediated) social interaction.

In principle, on Twitter, Instagram, and the like all users could respond to the performer, and the performer could respond to all users. But in practice, potentially most users

do not respond to the performer, and to many users the performer might not respond. PSI refers to the illusionary experience of being in a social interaction while one is not. Therefore, scholars examining PSI under generally interactive conditions need to focus on these users that are actually *not* reciprocally engaged with an online performer, or not as fully engaged as they feel they are. However, users that feel that the performer is mutually aware and attentive and responsive because they are actually reciprocally engaged with the performer (e.g., by posting a comment, by posting a comment and even receiving a reply, or by being directly individually addressed) might not be considered as taking part in a PSI or as having a parasocial experience. There seems to be nothing illusionary about the experience of these users.

Accordingly, scholars examining PSI in generally interactive settings need to distinguish in their studies those individuals who were actually reciprocally engaged (HCI or CMC) from those who experienced PSI. For example, a study trying to flesh out PSI among followers of a YouTuber would need to focus on a certain exposure situation and then map out what actually happened in that situation (e.g., which forms of addressing and interactions between the performer and each individual user actually took place). This objective layer might then be contrasted to what each individual user subjectively perceived or experienced to be happening. This way, the study could distinguish correct experiences of the situation (e.g., users who were personally addressed or part of the interaction, and perceived it as such, or who were not personally addressed or in an interaction and also did not feel that way) from illusionary (i.e., parasocial) experiences (e.g., users who were not personally addressed or in an interaction, but who experienced the situation as such).

This implies that the study of PSI in online environments or other interactive settings requires not only a careful empirical examination of users and their experience, but also a detailed understanding of the performer and the performer's actual interaction with individual followers (e.g., With whom of the followers was the performer interacting? Who of the followers was directly personally addressed and who was not? How intimate did the performer feel in the interaction?). Well-designed manipulations in experiments might ensure researchers have comprehensive insights into what actually happened and what users felt like happening in related performer–follower encounters. Social network analyses of performer–follower collectives and a closer inspection of performer–follower dyads, or at least the attempt to more clearly distinguish how much followers were actually engaged versus how much they felt engaged with a performer in self-reports, might help fleshing out potential parasocial experiences among users in natural out-of-the-lab settings, and distinguish them from actual (mediated) social interaction experiences.

Related efforts to better understand PSI in interactive settings, particularly if paralleled by empirical research examining performer's anticipated audience responses and implicit forms of address, will further advance the merging of interpersonal and mass

communication theory (Lee, 2020; O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018; Walther & Valkenburg, 2017) and promise to pave the way for utilizing PSI as a central communication–scientific concept in 21st century media research.

Note

1. Some authors (e.g., Abidin, 2015) stress that online personalities provide a more unedited, authentic look at their personal life (or whatever domain or skill they are displaying online) than traditional TV personae. Hence, their behavior might be rather authentic than performed, and accordingly the performer label might not fit. However, I assume that due to the fact that they are consciously acting in front of an audience and thus consciously displaying their life or their skills rather than simply living a life or doing things in their own right still justifies calling them online *performers*.

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CHAPTER

4 Methods and Measures in Investigating PSEs

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Abstract

To assist scholars in designing studies that have increased validity, this chapter provides an extensive review of measurement options and experimental manipulation of parasocial experiences (PSEs). First, the chapter offers a comprehensive discussion of 21 self-report scales for measuring general parasocial relationships (PSRs); various specific subtypes of PSRs (e.g., PSRs in children, political PSRs); parasocial interactions (PSIs); and parasocial breakups (PSBs). The strengths of each measure and questions pertaining to the measure's validity, reliability, and appropriateness for utilization in different contexts are highlighted. Next, experimental paradigms and manipulations of PSI and PSR are reviewed, giving especial attention to validity considerations.

Key Words: measurement, manipulation, experiments, surveys, PSI, PSR, PSB, children

Methods in Parasocial Experience Research

Research in parasocial experiences (PSEs) is methodologically diverse, encompassing qualitative methods such as interviews (Pitout, 1998) and qualitative content analysis (e.g., Sood & Rogers, 2000), and quantitative methods, including surveys (e.g., Hoffner & Cohen, 2018) and experiments (e.g., Beege et al., 2019). With the recent proliferation of research on PSEs, researchers introduced more sophisticated and valid measures and manipulations of these theoretical constructs (see Chapter 1). The richness of methodological options is a blessing that also presents some challenges for selecting the most appropriate research tools. To assist scholars in designing studies that are more valid, we provide an extensive review of measurement options and experimental manipulation of PSEs.

The History and Challenges in the Evolution of PSE Measures

The challenges associated with operationalizing PSEs are intertwined with conceptualization struggles in this field (see Chapters 1, 2, 3). From its inception, the measurement of PSEs reflected a muddy distinction between parasocial interaction (PSI) and parasocial relationship (PSR). It took two decades for Horton and Wohl's (1956) ideas to be transformed from theoretical arguments into empirical research. The first published attempt to

operationalize PSEs was Rosengren et al.'s (1976) survey of children aged 10 and 15 years in southern Sweden. The inaugural PSI scale comprised three items ($\alpha = .77$) and showed evidence of construct validity, converging with retroactive involvement measures (dubbed "long-term identification") and transportation and character identification (a variable the authors called "capture scale"). This initial PSE measure, however, also embodied what would become a lingering confusion between PSI and PSR. The scale included two items clearly tapping into the interactive aspects of the PSE ("Sometimes it almost feels as if someone in the programme is talking directly to me," and "Sometimes I think that one of the people in this programme seems so real that I can almost talk to him"). However, the third item captured PSRs rather than PSIs ("I often think that the people I see in this programme almost become old friends").

A major stride in not only popularizing PSE research, but also cementing this measurement confusion came with the introduction of Rubin's PSI Scale (Rubin & Perse, 1987; Rubin et al., 1985). The original scale adapted many of the items from two earlier attempts to measure PSEs: Nordlund's (1978) measurement of PSEs as a two-dimensional construct in a sample of adults in Sweden, and Levy's (1979) measure of PSI with news anchors on a sample of U.S. adults. Rubin's scale originally included 20 items that were intended to represent a unidimensional construct, and it was later shortened to 10 items (Rubin et al., 1985).

As PSE research became more popular, so did Rubin's PSI-Scale, which scholars used extensively in the 1990s and early 2000s. More recently, however, researchers have been raising concerns about the face validity of this measure (e.g., Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013). These scholars noted that although the scale's *name* references PSI, the majority of the items appear to correspond to relational aspects of the PSE (e.g., "I think of my favorite newscaster like an old friend") or other forms of involvement, such as empathy and attraction. In other words, the measurement items implied an operational definition other than a sense of being in a mutually aware interaction.

It became common practice to utilize only some of the items from the full or short version of the scale. Tukachinsky et al.'s (2020) meta-analysis of PSR research revealed that out of 105 studies that used Rubin's PSI-Scale, only 36% used either scale in its entirety, and about half (56%) of the studies dropped some of the items.[1] On average, these researchers used only 6.58 items from the short form's original 10. The most commonly used items were numbers 4 (26 studies), 7 (55 studies), 8 (35 studies), 13 (29 studies), and 18 (25 studies). When referencing the 20-item scale but only using part of it, the researchers on average retained 14.52 items. The most commonly used items were numbers 4 (26 studies), 8 (36 studies), 11 (37 studies), 12 (20 studies), 15 (25 studies), 16 (22 studies), and 17 (35 studies).

Other scales emerged to varying degrees of popularity and exhibited better face and content validity in assessing PSRs. However, the names of the scales continued to be somewhat of a misnomer, as these relationship scales continued to use the term "PSI"

in their names (e.g., Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale, Bocarnea & Brown, 2007; Parasocial Interaction Scale, Tsay & Bodine, 2012).

Against this backdrop, Hartmann's work developing scales that specifically assessed PSIs rather than the relational aspects of the PSE advanced the field tremendously (see Chapter 3). The new measures were developed alongside a much needed theoretical clarification of these concepts and empirical demonstration of how they can even be orthogonal (e.g., Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011), laying the foundation to research showing that PSI and PSR can work independently to produce different outcomes (Dibble et al., 2016; Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016).

Another challenge faced by PSE measurement development is the question of the proper dimensions that comprise PSEs. Relatedly, some scales aim to assess specific subtypes of PSRs (e.g., romantic PSR). These scales capture various facets of PSEs in a more nuanced manner. For example, some measures specifically include subscales to assess relational trust and support (e.g., friendship subscales, Tukachinsky, 2011; "guidance" subscale, Tsay & Bodine, 2012) or to distinguish between cognitive and emotional dimensions of the PSE (e.g., Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018; Liebers & Schramm, 2017; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). Another frontier in specialized measurement is the development of PSE measurement in children by adapting existing measures for use in younger populations (e.g., Rosaen & Dibble, 2008). These measures also have demonstrated some structural inconsistency in terms of the scales' dimensionality.

Tukachinsky and Stever (2019) proposed an alternative approach. They theorized that PSRs develop over time and go through five relational stages, akin to the stages of interpersonal relationships (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009). Each stage was posited to have its unique relational markers, and the authors suggested using different items from existing PSE measures to capture these stage-specific characteristics. For example, at the first stage of the PSR (initiation), individuals should rate high on attraction, social comparison, and interest in knowing about the media figure, but still not have high commitments or knowledge, understanding, and emotional bonding, which will emerge at later stages of the relationship (see Chapter 5 and Table 5.1 for description of the stages and the measures). This scale is not discussed here because it awaits empirical examination. However, if, indeed, relationships evolve through stages over time, and the stages really do have unique relational markers, then it is reasonable to expect varying dimensional profiles in the measures of PSR that we review in this chapter.

The following section reviews 21 measures of various PSEs (PSI, PSR, PSB [parasocial breakup], and related constructs). This list is not exhaustive. Rather, it covers what we believe to be the most commonly used measures, as well as scales that have a potential to be used for specific aspects of PSEs (e.g., children's PSR, motivations for PSIs). For each scale, we briefly review evidence of the scale's reliability and validity, the items verbatim, and information about the contexts and populations in which the scale was used in the past. We then offer recommendations and considerations for using this measure.

Review of PSE Measures

We first review general PSR measures, followed by measures of specific types of PSRs (e.g., romantic), PSI measures, measures of PSB, and measures of PSE in children.

Parasocial Interaction Scale (PSI-Scale)

Scale Description. This is a unidimensional scale comprised of 20 items (Rubin et al., 1985). A short version of the scale consists of 10 items (Rubin & Perse, 1987). See Box 4.1 for a complete list of items.

> **Box 4.1** Parasocial Interaction Scale
>
> **Location**
>
> Rubin, A. M., & Perse, E. M. (1987). Audience activity and soap opera involvement: A a uses and effects investigation. *Human Communication Research*, *14*(2), 246–268. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1985.tb00071x
>
> Rubin, A. M., Perse, E. M., & Powell, R. A. (1985). Loneliness, parasocial interaction, and local television news viewing. *Human Communication Research, 12*(2), 155–180. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1985.tb00071.x
>
> Measured on a 5-point Likert scale (from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*).
>
> **Items and Instructions**
>
> The full scale comes from Rubin et al. (1985). The 10 items included in the short version of the scale (Rubin & Perse, 1987) appear in italics.
>
> 1. The news program shows me what the newscasters are like.
> 2. When the newscasters joke around with one another it makes the news easier to watch.
> 3. When my favorite newscaster shows me how he or she feels about the news, it helps me make up my own mind about the news story.
> 4. *I feel sorry for my favorite newscaster when he or she makes a mistake.*
> 5. When I'm watching the newscast, I feel as if I am part of their group.
> 6. I like to compare my ideas with what my favorite newscaster says.
> 7. *The newscasters make me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.*
> 8. *I see my favorite newscaster as a natural, down-to-earth person.*
> 9. I like hearing the voice of my favorite newscaster in my home.
> 10. *My favorite newscaster keeps me company when the news is on television.*
> 11. I look forward to watching my favorite newscaster on tonight's news.
> 12. *If my favorite newscaster appeared on another television program, I would watch that program.*
> 13. *When my favorite newscaster reports a story, he or she seems to understand the kinds of things I want to know.*
> 14. I sometimes make remarks to my favorite newscaster during the newscast.
> 15. *If there were a story about my favorite newscaster in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it.*
> 16. *I miss seeing my favorite newscaster when he or she is on vacation.*
> 17. *I would like to meet my favorite newscaster in person.*
> 18. *I think my favorite newscaster is like an old friend.*
> 19. *I find my favorite newscaster to be attractive.*
> 20. I am not as satisfied when I get my news from a newscaster different from my favorite newscaster.

Reliability. The scale performs consistently reliably. Rubin et al. (1985) reported the reliability of the scale to be α = .93. The 10-item version had α = .85 (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Later studies that utilized the scale in other contexts also reported high reliabilities (e.g., Conway & Rubin, 1991, α = .90; Ledbetter & Meisner, 2021, α = .96). Rubin et al. (1985) reported that the items load on a single factor explaining 46% of the variance.

Validity. Gleich (1997) argued that there are several distinct factors underlying the scale, and it should be treated as a multidimensional concept. Others have argued that these factors are not subcomponents of the same superordinate factor but distinct theoretical constructs. The scale has been criticized for its face and content validity due to the inclusion of items that appear to be germane to both PSRs and PSIs (e.g., Dibble et al., 2016; Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016). To address this issue, as discussed above, many studies included only a subset of the items (Tukachinsky et al., 2020).

Dibble et al. (2016) evaluated the scale's construct validity. The PSI-Scale (both short and long versions) correlated more strongly with Tukachinsky's (2011) parasocial friendship (PSF) subscales of communication and support (*r*'s ranged from .71 to .75) than with the EPSI (Experience of Parasocial Interaction) Scale, which specifically assesses interactive aspects of PSEs (long PSI-Scale: r = .44, short: r = .54). Moreover, Rubin's PSI-Scales correlated more strongly with relationship closeness (long: r = .50, short: r = .44) than did EPSI (r = .30). These figures were on par with the correlation of Tukachinsky's PSF scales with closeness (communication: r = .50, support: r = .41). Rubin et al. (1985) demonstrated that the scale was positively correlated with affinity with the media content (r = .61) and realism (r = .47). The scale also positively correlated with attraction (social attraction: r = .35, task attraction r = .33) and relationship importance (r = .52) (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Together, these findings indicate Rubin's PSI-Scale is a valid measure of PSRs.

Population. The original scale (Rubin et al., 1985) was validated on college students from evening classes from two regional campuses in Illinois (age M = 26.52, SD = 9.09, 62% female). The scale has been used in other age groups, such as older adults (Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005, age M = 63.40 years old; Eggermont & Vandebosch, 2001, 60- to 90-year-old adults); teens (Aubrey et al., 2014, M = 16.82); and children (Hoffner, 1996, children in second to sixth grade, aged 7–12). The scale was used in multiple countries outside the United States, such as Germany (Gleich, 1997); Belgium (Eggermont & Vandebosch, 2001); Macau, Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (e.g., Liu et al., 2019); and Israel (e.g., J. Cohen & Hershman-Shitrit, 2017, 90% Jews, 6.6% Arabs).

Context. The scale was originally developed in the context of PSRs with a television news anchor (Rubin et al., 1985), but later applied to fictional characters in soap operas (Rubin & Perse, 1987) and sitcoms (e.g., Eyal & Cohen, 2006). Scholars have since applied the PSI-Scale to social media celebrities (Ledbetter & Meisner, 2021; Liu et al., 2019); liked or nonpreferred entertainment celebrities (e.g., Walter et al., 2022); a political celebrity (e.g., Donald Trump; Cohen & Holbert, 2021); and spokespersons

in explicit persuasive messages (e.g., Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016). Most commonly, the scale is used to assess PSRs with the respondent's favorite character of the participant's choice (e.g., Conway & Rubin, 1991).

Recommendations. Despite the scrutiny over validity considerations and the introduction of alternatives, these scales remain widely popular and have been used in diverse populations and with different media targets. The scale's name is a misnomer because the scale does not tap PSIs (understood as conversational give and take that occurs while viewing). However, it appears to be a valid measure of PSRs. Accordingly, reducing the number of items does not affect the scale performance but can improve its content validity. Thus, using four to six items from the scale can be an effective, reliable, and valid measure of general amicable PSRs in a variety of contexts.

Audience–Persona Interaction

Scale Description. The Audience–Persona Interaction Scale (API) includes 22 items comprising four dimensions. See Box 4.2 for a complete list of items.

Reliability. Auter and Palmgreen (2000) reported acceptable reliability estimates for each dimension (Study 1: $\alpha_{identify}$ = .87, $\alpha_{interest}$ = .79, α_{group} = .83, $\alpha_{problem}$ = .85; Study 2: $\alpha_{Identify}$ = .81, $\alpha_{interest}$ = .82, α_{group} = .73, $\alpha_{problem}$ = .70). This pattern was replicated by Ledbetter and Redd (2016), who obtained alphas greater than .80. Fogel and Shlivko (2016) modified the language of the items slightly, adding the words "reality TV program" to fit the study, and also observed excellent reliabilities ($\alpha_{Identify}$ = .95, $\alpha_{interest}$ = .91, α_{group} = .93, $\alpha_{problem}$ = .92). Auter and Palmgreen (2000) in Study 2 also reported the reliability for the entire scale combined (α = .84). Tian and Hoffner (2010) used six items of the original scale (α = .87), and Tsiotsou (2015) reported only overall reliability (α = .79).

Validity. The API correlated positively with exposure to the media content featuring that personality, affinity for TV, and perception of TV as reality (*r*'s ranged from .14 to .28; Auter & Palmgreen, 2000). However, other studies left the facets uncombined. For example, Ledbetter and Redd (2016) validated the four-dimensional structure of the API and observed that the interdimensional correlations ranged from r = .21 to r = .59, whereas Tsiotsou (2015) found the API scale items loaded onto three factors instead of four (Identification with the SNS members, Interest/Interaction with SNS members, and Problem Solving).

Population. The measure was developed using a sample of U.S. college students (Study 1) and U.S. high school students (Study 2, M_{age} = 16.76). The API has since been used with more age-diverse samples recruited via social networks (Tsiotsou, 2015, age 25–64 years).

Context. The scale has been used in reference to a favorite television (e.g., Auter & Palmgreen, 2000) or media personality (e.g., Ledbetter & Redd, 2016), specific TV characters (e.g., *Lost*; Tian & Hoffner, 2010), and others on social networking sites (Tsiotsou, 2015).

Box 4.2 Audience–Persona Interaction

Location

Auter, P. J., & Palmgreen, P. (2000). Development and validation of a parasocial interaction measure: The audience-persona interaction scale. *Communication Research Reports*, *17*(1), 79–89. https://doi.org/10.1080/08824090009388753

Items and Instructions

Measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*.

FAV = "My favorite character from the show I just watched." CHARS = "The characters from the show I just watched."

Identification With Favorite Character

1. FAV reminds me of myself.
2. I have the same qualities as FAV.
3. I seem to have the same beliefs or attitudes as FAV.
4. I have the same problems as FAV.
5. I can imagine myself as FAV.
6. I can identify with FAV.

Interest in Favorite Character

7. I would like to meet the actor who played FAV.
8. I would watch the actor on another program.
9. I enjoyed trying to predict what FAV would do.
10. I hoped FAV achieved his or her goals.
11. I care about what happens to FAV.
12. I like hearing the voice of FAV.

Group Identification/Interaction

13. CHARS interactions similar to mine with friends.
14. CHARS interactions similar to mine with family.
15. My friends are like CHARS.
16. I'd enjoy interacting with CHARS and my friends at same time.
17. While watching show, I felt included in the group.
18. I can relate to CHARS' attitudes.

Favorite Character Problem-Solving Abilities

19. I wish I could handle problems as well as FAV.
20. I like the way FAV handles problems.
21. I would like to be more like FAV.
22. I usually agree with FAV.

Recommendations. As its name implies, the API casts a wide conceptual net in terms of the ways an audience/viewer can orient to a mediated persona. We recommend against employing this measure as a stand-in for PSI because the dimensions theorized here reflect longer term relational involvement. On the other hand, these items seem reasonable for assessing orientations such as identification and interest. The items are designed to capture

distinct dimensions, and we are most comfortable recommending that they be used as such. Aggregating across the dimensions can hamper inferences of reliability because, all else being equal, more items will mean greater reliability. Also, discrete dimensions are by definition discrete constructs. Aggregating obscures granular details that benefit theory building. Finally, because there is evidence of discrepancy regarding the factor structure (four dimensions or three), and in keeping with sound measurement practices, we recommend scholars who choose this instrument perform and report confirmatory factor analyses.

Celebrity–Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale

Scale Description. The Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale (Bocarnea & Brown, 2007) includes 20 items adapted from other parasocial scales (e.g., Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; Cole & Leets, 1999; Rubin et al., 1985). See Box 4.3 for a complete list of items.

Box 4.3 Celebrity–Personal Parasocial Interaction Scale

Location

Bocarnea, M. C., & Brown, W. J. (2007). Celebrity-Personal Parasocial Interaction Scale. In R. A. Reynolds, R. Woods, & J. Baker (Eds.), *Handbook of research on electronic surveys and measurements* (pp. 309–312). Idea Group Reference.

Items and Instructions

Agreement measured on a 5-point Likert scale (from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*).

1. [celebrity or persona] makes me feel as if I am with someone I know well.
2. If [celebrity or persona] appeared on a TV program, I would watch that program.
3. I see [celebrity or persona] as a natural down-to-earth person.
4. If I saw a newspaper or magazine story about [celebrity or persona], I would read it.
5. I would like to meet [celebrity or persona] in person.
6. I feel that I understand the emotions [celebrity or persona] experiences.
7. I find myself thinking about [celebrity or persona] on a regular basis.
8. I do not have any feelings about [celebrity or persona].*
9. I like to watch [celebrity or persona] on television.
10. Whenever I am unable to get news about [celebrity or persona], I really miss it.
11. Learning about [celebrity or persona] is important to me.
12. I have been seeking out information in the media to learn more about [celebrity or persona].
13. I sometimes go to the Internet to obtain more information about [celebrity or persona].
14. Sometimes I feel like calling or writing [celebrity or persona].
15. [celebrity or persona] understands the kinds of things I want to know.
16. I sometimes make remarks to [celebrity or persona] while watching television.
17. I am very much aware of the details of [celebrity or persona]'s life.
18. I feel like I have very little understanding of [celebrity or persona] as a person.*
19. I look forward to seeing [celebrity or persona] on television or in the print media.
20. I am not really interested in [celebrity or persona].*

* Reverse-coded item

Reliability. Bocarnea and Brown (2007, p. 310) reported that previous studies consistently found that the scale is unidimensional and has a reliability of .80 to .90. These are consistent with more recent publications (e.g., Wen, 2017). However, some researchers eliminated items in order to improve fit (Bae et al., 2010, removed four items, α = .93). Several other studies used a subset of the 20 items and reported high reliability (Brown & De Matviuk, 2010: 15 items, α = .92; David et al, 2019: 13 items, α = .89; E. L. Cohen & Hoffner, 2016: 12 items, α = .81).

Validity. Bocarnea and Brown (2007) reported that across several studies, Celebrity–Persona Parasocial Interaction (CPPI) was positively associated with identification with and exposure to celebrities.

Population. The scale has been used on adults in the United States (e.g., David et al., 2019: 57% female, aged 18–55 years old; E. L. Cohen & Hoffner, 2016: 57% females, aged 19–74 years old); Singapore (Wen, 2017: college students, 58% female, 20–35 years old); South Korea (Bae et al., 2010: 51.9% male, M_{age} = 37.5 years old), and Argentina (Brown & De Matviuk, 2010).

Context. The scale has been specifically used in reference to celebrities rather than a fictional character. These could be one's favorite celebrity of choice (David et al., 2019); a specific celebrity, such as actors Angelina Jolie (Kosenko et al., 2016) and Robin Williams (E. L. Cohen & Hoffner, 2016); or athletes, such as the soccer player Diego Maradona (Brown & De Matviuk, 2010).

Recommendation. Although it uses the term "PSI" in its name, only Item 16 taps interactions, whereas the rest of the scale might be suitable for assessing PSRs. Like Rubin's PSI-Scale, this instrument is popular, but the additional evidence for undimensionality might make this a more attractive option than the PSI-Scale. At the same time, even though scale reliability is satisfactory across studies, researchers continue to eliminate items inconsistently (as happens with the PSI-Scale). This raises concerns for measurement validity. Furthermore, as the scale name suggests, it is more appropriate for assessing PSRs with celebrities than with other types of media figures.

Parasocial Interaction Dimensions

Scale Description. Despite using "PSI" in its name, the Parasocial Interaction Dimensions and Items scale (Tsay & Bodine, 2012) assesses four aspects of PSRs, not interactions. In fact, items that did tap the interactive aspects of the PSE (e.g., "When I am watching my favorite media personality or character on television, I give my favorite media personality or character my full attention when they are "on") were excluded from the final scale due to low factor loadings. The final scale includes 18 items comprising four dimensions. See Box 4.4 for a complete list of items.

Reliability. The scale had good reliability: $\alpha_{guiding}$ = .92, $\alpha_{face\text{-}to\text{-}face\ desire}$ = .80 $\alpha_{intimacy}$ = .82, and $\alpha_{familiarity}$ = .79. Later studies within other media contexts obtained similar reliabilities (Ingram & Luckett, 2019: $\alpha_{guiding}$ = .94, $\alpha_{face\text{-}to\text{-}face\ desire}$ = .86 $\alpha_{intimacy}$ = .83, and $\alpha_{familiarity}$ = .79; Brodie & Ingram, 2021: $\alpha_{guiding}$ = .94, $\alpha_{face\text{-}to\text{-}face\ desire}$ = .91 $\alpha_{intimacy}$ = .81, and $\alpha_{familiarity}$ = .76).

Box 4.4 Parasocial Interaction Dimensions and Items

Location

Tsay, M., & Bodine, B. M. (2012). Exploring parasocial interaction in college students as a multidimensional construct: Do personality, interpersonal need, and television motive predict their relationships with media characters? *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, *1*(3), 185.

Items and Instructions

Measured on a 7-point Likert scale (*Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*).

Guidance

1. I feel good when I turn to my favorite media personality or character for advice.
2. I use advice that I learn from my favorite media personality or character.
3. I am happy turning to my favorite media personality or character for guidance.
4. I am comfortable learning from my favorite media personality or character.
5. I look up to my favorite media personality or character.
6. My favorite media personality or character teaches me important lessons.
7. I seek guidance from my favorite media personality or character.
8. I treat my favorite media personality or character as a role model.

Face-to-Face Desire

9. I would be happy to meet my favorite media personality or character in person.
10. If I saw my favorite media personality or character on the streets, I would talk to him or her.
11. I would be comfortable with my favorite media personality or character if we met in person.
12. If given the opportunity, I would contact my favorite media personality or character.

Intimacy

13. When I am not watching my favorite media personality or character on television, I seek information about my favorite media personality or character.
14. I have an intimate connection with my favorite media personality or character.
15. I see my favorite media personality or character as a close friend.

Familiarity

16. I am familiar with the habits of my favorite media personality or character.
17. My favorite media personality or character makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.
18. I have a good understanding of my favorite media personality or character.

Validity. Tsay and Bodine (2012) reported the four dimensions were strongly intercorrelated (r range from .36 to .57), and they were related to various personality characteristics related to the ability to form and maintain interpersonal relationships and gratifications from media use. For example, face-to-face desire was positively associated with need for inclusion (partial r = .22) and need for affection (partial r = .19). All four dimensions were positively associated with neuroticism (partial r ranged between .12 and .30), pleasure (partial r = .15–.30), and escapism (partial r = .14–.22). Relaxation was found to be positively related to all dimensions except for familiarity (partial r = .17–.23), while habit was positively related to all dimensions except for face-to-face desire (partial r = .14–.25). Ingram and Luckett (2019) reported that the dimensions were positively

correlated with the total number of book and movies consumed (partial *r* ranged from .07 to .17 for books and .13 to .18 for movies).

Population. The original scale was developed using U.S. college students (N = 272) and was later used on more diverse samples. Ingram and Luckett (2019) used social media and Harry Potter online communities to obtain a sample of Harry Potter fans aged 18–84 years old (M_{age} = 25.4) from the United States (63%), United Kingdom (21%), Canada (7%), Australian (7%), New Zealand (1%), and South Africa (1%). Brodie and Ingram (2021) recruited fans aged 16–78 years old (M_{age} = 28.4) through social media, local comic conventions, and crowdsourcing platforms.

Context. The original scale referred to the respondents' favorite character. Ingram and Luckett (2019) asked about *Harry Potter* books and movies, and Brodie and Ingram (2021) examined PSI with comic book characters.

Recommendation. The scale (despite its misleading name) appears to be a good measure of amicable PSRs. It presents a robust factorial structure, with some of the factors (e.g., guidance) redundant with Tukachinsky's PSF scale. It appears to have good content and face validity and applicability to a range of situations. Although it seems to offer a good (albeit lengthy) alternative to existing scales, additional testing is needed to see how the scale correlates with Rubin's PSI and Tukachinsky's PSF scales and to what extent the distinct dimensions have independent effects on various PSE outcomes.

Positive and Negative PSR

Scale Description. Hartmann and colleagues (2008) developed a measure of both positive and negative PSRs, each consisting of two factors pertaining to intimacy (apathy/friendship) and interest (disinterest/interest). Some of the items on the positive PSR scale were adapted from previous measures. The scale was originally developed in German, but the items have been translated by the authors to English for the purpose of the publication. See Box 4.5 for a complete list of items.

Reliability. Hartmann et al. (2008) reported good reliabilities ($\alpha_{positive}$ = .82, $\alpha_{negative}$ = .81). A factor analysis revealed two factors explaining 59% of the variance. Bernhold and Metzger (2020) used the virtual friendship items with α = .80; Shan et al. (2020) used 12 positive PSR items with α = .86. Wulf et al. (2020) used the virtual friendship subscale but had to exclude two items due to low factor loading and cross-loading, resulting in reliability of α = .79. Bernhold (2019) reported a reliability of α = .81 for the antipathy scale.

Validity. Hartmann et al. (2008) reported that both negative PSR subscales predicted hope for negative outcomes for the disliked driver, whereas the positive PSR subscales predicted hoping for positive outcomes for one's favorite driver and suspense while watching the race. Wulf et al. (2020) similarly found that positive PSRs were positively associated with suspense.

Box 4.5 Positive and Negative PSRs

Location

Hartmann, T., Stuke, D., & Daschmann, G. (2008). Positive parasocial relationships with drivers affect suspense in racing sport spectators. *Journal of Media Psychology*, *20*(1), 24–34.

Items and Instructions

Items assessed on a 5-point Likert scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*.

Negative Scale

Antipathy

1. I am happy whenever I learn that something bad happened to this driver.
2. I never agree with the actions of this racing driver.
3. I never liked this racing driver.
4. It is annoying to see this racing driver on TV.
5. I do not want to be reminded about this racing driver.
6. I find this racing driver to be dislikable.
7. This racing driver does not perform admirable actions.

Disinterest

8. I am not interested in articles or coverage in the media about this racing driver.
9. I would not mind if I never saw this racing driver again.
10. I do not want to get to know this racing driver any further.
11. I am not concerned if I do not see this racing driver on TV for a long time.

Positive Scale

Virtual Friendship

1. I think my favorite racing driver is like an old friend.
2. My favorite racing driver makes me feel as comfortable as when I am with friends.
3. I think about my favorite racing driver even when he is not on TV.
4. I miss my favorite racing driver if I do not see him on TV for a long time.
5. I feel that I know my favorite racing driver very well.
6. I try to imagine what my favorite racing driver thinks about a race.

Respectful Interest

7. The TV coverage shows me what my favorite racing driver is like.
8. I find my favorite racing driver to be likable.
9. I mostly agree with the actions of my favorite racing driver.
10. If there were a story about my favorite racing driver in a newspaper or on TV, I would read or watch it.
11. I would like to meet my favorite racing driver in person.
12. I admire my favorite racing driver for his achievements.
13. I look forward to watching my favorite racing driver in the next race.*

* Also considered under virtual friendship factor

Population. The scales were developed using a sample of German Formula 1 fans aged 15–68 years old (*N* = 274, 78% male, M_{age} = 31), who were recruited using snowball sampling. The positive PSR scales were later used in more diverse samples. Bernhold and Metzger (2020) recruited older adults (*N* = 261, M_{age} = 62.31 years, 67% female) through an online crowdsourcing platform. Wulf et al. (2020) sampled 548 individuals aged 14–43 years of age (*M* = 21.8, 95.8% were male), recruited globally through gaming community websites and platforms. The final sample consisted of 51.6% European and 37.8% North American gamers. Shan et al. (2020) collected data from 513 individuals aged 18–54 (62.8% female) from 33 provinces across mainland China. The antipathy scale has been used by Bernhold (2019) in a sample of Americans aged 55–77 recruited through a crowdsourcing platform.

Context. The original positive and negative PSR scales have been used in reference to the respondent's favorite and least favorite Formula 1 drivers. Bernhold and Metzger (2020) examined positive PSRs with a favorite television character, Wulf et al. (2020) examined positive PSRs with a video gamer on a streaming platform (Twitch), and Shan et al. (2020) examined positive PSRs with social media influencers. To examine a negative PSR, Bernhold (2019) asked survey respondents to choose their most disliked television personality. Only 18% used the scale in reference to a fictional character (the most commonly named media personalities were Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, as data were collected in April 2017).

Recommendation. The negative PSR scale is unique and offers very important opportunities for much needed nonamicable PSR research (see Chapter 18). Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research utilizing the negative PSR scale. Further research is needed to validate the scale's performance in other populations, contexts, and targets (e.g., fictional villains) and its relationship to other media experiences (e.g., hate-watching). The positive PSR scale has been validated across contexts and populations and offers a better face and content validity than Rubin's PSI-Scale. However, it lacks the granularity of Tsay and Bodine's (2012) PSI Dimensions scale. Thus, it appears that its predominant advantage is when used in combination with the negative PSR scale to offer insight into both complementary experiences.

PSR Attributes Scale

Scale Description. The PSR Attributes scale (Madison & Porter, 2016) includes 8 of the 14 imagined interactions (II) subscales from Honeycutt (2003) adapted for the parasocial context. These attributes (formerly referred to as "characteristics") are proactivity, retroactivity, frequency, variety, discrepancy, self-dominance, valence, and specificity. The full scale (Madison & Porter, 2016) included 34 items that corresponded to six dimensions. A short version of the scale was developed by selecting two items with the highest factor loadings from each factor (Madison et al., 2019). See Box 4.6 for a complete list of items.

Box 4.6 PSR Attributes Scale

Location

Full Scale

Madison, T. P., & Porter, L. V. (2016). Cognitive and imagery attributes of parasocial relationships. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, *35*(4), 359–379.

Short Version

Madison, T. P., Covington, E. N., Wright, K., & Gaspard, T. (2019). Credibility and attributes of parasocial relationships with Alex Jones. *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal*, *34*(2), 1–18.

Items and Instructions

The items included in the short scale appear in italics. Measured as agreement on a 7-point Likert scale. II = imagined interaction.

Frequency

1. I imagine interacting with my favorite TV character many times throughout the week.
2. *I frequently imagine interacting with my favorite TV character.*
3. I rarely imagine myself interacting with my favorite TV character.*
4. *I often have imagined interactions with my favorite TV character throughout the day.*

Retroactivity

5. I often have imagined myself interacting with my favorite TV character after seeing them on TV
6. After important meetings I frequently imagine them.
7. After watching my favorite TV character, I relive conversations with him or her that took place during the show.
8. I often think about prior conversations that my favorite TV character has participated in.
9. Sometimes I see something on TV that reminds me of a real-life situation and I imagine myself dealing with the real-life situation under the circumstances I saw on TV.
10. When I see something on TV that reminds me of my own life, I incorporate what I have seen on TV into an imagined interaction with the character(s) involved.

Variety

11. I imagine many interactions with different TV characters.
12. I have recurrent imagined interactions with the same TV character over the same topic.
13. Many of my imagined interactions are with the same TV character.*
14. *My imagined interactions often involve a variety of TV characters.*
15. My imagined interactions tend to be on a lot of different topics.
16. *TV shows and movies add variety to my imagined interactions.*

Self-Dominance

17. I talk a lot in my imagined interactions with my favorite TV character.
18. My favorite TV character(s) dominates my conversation in my IIs.*
19. I dominate the conversation in my imagined interactions with TV characters.
20. When I have imagined interactions with my TV character, the TV character talks a lot.*
21. *If I borrow scenes from TV for my IIs with real people, I tend to talk more than the other person.*
22. *If I borrow scenes from TV for my IIs with real people, the other person tends to talk more than me in the II.*

Specificity

23. When I imagine interactions with TV characters, they tend to be detailed and well developed.
24. It is hard recalling the details of imagined interactions with TV characters.*
25. My imagined interactions with TV characters are very specific because I envision where the conversation takes place.
26. When I have an imagined interaction with a TV character, I often have only a vague idea of what the other says.*
27. When I have IIs involving real people, sometimes I include scenes or "props" from television shows.
28. I often use catchphrases from television in my IIs with real people.
29. *Other people in my IIs often use catchphrases from television.*
30. *My IIs are very specific when I envision them taking place in a location I've seen on TV.*
31. My IIs are very specific when I envision them taking place using dialog I've seen on TV.

Valence

32. I enjoy most of my imagined interactions with my favorite TV character.
33. My imagined interactions with my favorite TV character are usually quite unpleasant.*
34. *My imagined interactions with my favorite TV character are usual enjoyable.*
35. *My imagined interactions with my favorite TV character usually involve happy or fun activities.*
36. I enjoy most of my IIs with real people when I include TV characters or pieces of television scenes in them.
37. I enjoy rehearsing things in mind that I've seen on TV.
38. Incorporating pieces of TV into my IIs often leads to positive II outcomes.

*Indicates reverse coding.

Reliability. The scale had good reliability: $\alpha_{\text{frequency}} = .93$, $\alpha_{\text{retroactivity}} = .83$, $\alpha_{\text{valence}} = .88$, $\alpha_{\text{variety}} = .92$, $\alpha_{\text{self-dominance}} = .76$, and $\alpha_{\text{specificity}} = .90$. Madison et al. (2019) used reported excellent (.85–.94) reliability for frequency, variety, valence, specificity, and self-dominance.

Validity. There were strong intercorrelations between the subscales, ranging from $r = .65$ to $r = .76$. Madison et al. (2019) found that variety and specificity, but not other attributes, were significant predictors of exposure and credibility.

Population and Context. The scale has been developed on a sample of U.S. college students ($N = 276$) in reference to their favorite TV personality. Madison et al. (2019) used the scale on a sample of 581 respondents from a crowdsourcing platform, examining their PSR with Alex Jones, host of *Infowars* (a far right conspiracy theory website).

Recommendation. The scale uniquely taps into specific relational maintenance practices of PSRs. As such, it has potential to offer a more nuanced understanding of exactly what the PSR entails. However, at this point few published studies used this scale. Additional research should validate the scale relating it to both PSI and PSR processes and

demonstrating the utility of the scale in predicting outcomes in various populations and contexts (e.g., fictional characters vs. celebrities).

Parasocial Imagined Interaction Functions

Scale Description. The Parasocial Imagined Interaction scale (Madison & Porter, 2015) complements the previously reviewed PSR Attributes Scale and includes the rest of the items from the last six subscales in Honeycutt's (2003) measure of imagined interactions (IIs): catharsis, compensation, conflict management, relational maintenance, self-understanding, and rehearsal. Of the six functions, relationship maintenance and compensation are the ones most directly related to PSR functions. A short version of the scale was developed by Madison et al. (2020) by selecting two items per factor with the highest factor loadings. See Box 4.7 for a complete list of items.

Box 4.7 Parasocial Imagined Interaction Functions

Location

Full Scale

Madison, T. P., & Porter, L. V. (2015). The people we meet: Discriminating functions of parasocial interactions. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, *35*(1), 47–71. https://doi.org/10.1177/0276236615574490

Short Version

Madison, T. P., Wright, K., & Gaspard, T. (2020). "My superpower is being honest": Perceived credibility and parasocial relationships with Alex Jones. *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal*, *36*(1), 50–64.

Items and Instructions

The items included in the short scale appear in italics. Measured as agreement on a 7-point Likert scale. II = imagined interaction.

Relationship Maintenance:

1. *I use imagined interactions to think about a favorite TV character with whom I have a close bond.*
2. IIs help keep relationships with my favorite character alive.
3. IIs are important in thinking about one's favorite TV character.
4. *IIs help me maintain a close bond with [my] favorite TV character.*
5. When watching romance on television I tend to think about my real significant other or a crush on my mind.
6. Watching romance on television helps me keep relationships with a significant other or a crush alive in my mind.
7. Watching how romance plays out on television is important for helping me maintain relationships with a crush or significant other.
8. Borrowing scenes or dialog from television for use in my IIs helps me maintain a close relationship with my relationship partner.

Conflict

9. My IIs with my favorite character usually involve conflicts or arguments.
10. I rarely recall my favorite TV character's old arguments in my mind.*
11. I often cannot get negative IIs "out of my mind" when I'm angry.
12. IIs with my favorite TV character help me manage conflict with real people.
13. It is sometimes hard to forget old arguments I have seen on TV.
14. *When I see conflict on television, I tend to think about the conflicts in my personal life.*
15. When I see conflict on television, I use it to shape my imagined interactions with real people.
16. When I think about the conflicts in my life, I use things I have seen on television to resolve them through my IIs.
17. *When I see conflict on a TV, I often recall conflicts in my own life.*
18. Watching television helps me escape from thinking about conflict.
19. I get ideas for managing conflict from watching television characters deal with their own conflicts.

Self-Understanding

20. I put myself in the (sometimes dramatic) positions of television characters and apply those situations to my life to see what I would do.
21. *I have imagined interaction with my favorite TV character to get a sense of who I am.*
22. *I have imagined interactions with my favorite TV character to get a sense of what I should do in some situations.*
23. I often ask, "what would I do?" when I see a TV character in a tough situation.
24. I often imagine what I would do if I were the victim of a crime.

Catharsis

25. *Imagined interactions with TV characters help me relieve tension and stress.*
26. *IIs with TV characters help me to reduce uncertainty about another's actions and behaviors.*
27. Thinking about important conversations with my favorite TV character actually increased tension, anxiety, and stress.*
28. IIs with TV characters make me feel tense when thinking about what another says.*
29. Putting my acquaintances with whom I have conflicts into violent or uncomfortable scenes from television makes me feel better.
30. Imagining people I like in rewarding or pleasant scenes from television makes me feel good.
31. Watching TV helps me deal with tension and anxiety.
32. When I see something I don't like on TV, sometimes I imagine putting my fist through the TV set.

Compensation

33. *Imagining talking to a TV character substitutes for the absence of real communication.*
34. IIs with my TV characters can be used to substitute for real conversations.
35. *IIs with TV characters may be used to substitute for the lack of real, face-to-face communication.*
36. It is rare for me to imagine talking with someone outside of his or her physical presence because I believe in the saying, "Out of sight, out of mind."*
37. While watching TV I frequently imagine talking with people I know about the program.
38. I would prefer to watch TV and imagine conversations with people I know than actually talk to them.
39. TV may be used to compensate for real-life communication.
40. TV shows often make me feel emotions I don't normally feel in everyday life.
41. I often use TV as a substitute for real-life conversations.

Rehearsal

42. IIs with my favorite TV character help me plan what I am going to say for an anticipated encounter with real people.
43. *I have IIs with my favorite character before entering a situation with someone whom I know will be evaluating me.*
44. IIs with my favorite TV character make me feel more confident and relaxed before I actually talk with an interaction partner.
45. *I have IIs with my favorite TV character(s) in order to practice what I am actually going to say to the person.*
46. Watching television helps me plan what I am going to say for an anticipated encounter.
47. Television gives me ideas about how to handle situations in which a person will be evaluating me.
48. When I think about what I'm going to say to someone, I tend to borrow ideas or catchphrases I have seen on TV.
49. I choose entertainment that makes me feel competent in my real-life relationships.

*Indicates reverse coding.

Reliability. The Imagined Interaction Functions scale had good reliability: $\alpha_{\text{relationship maintenance}}$ = .89; α_{conflict} = .83; $\alpha_{\text{self-understanding}}$ = .79; $\alpha_{\text{catharsis}}$ = .83; $\alpha_{\text{compensation}}$ = .90; and $\alpha_{\text{rehearsal}}$ = .91. Similar reliabilities have been reported by Madison et al. (2020) using a short version of the scale (.75–.94).

Validity. To examine construct validity, canonical correlations and principal component analysis (PCA) examined II functions relative to Rubin's PSI-Scale. The authors reported negative associations between II functions and low levels of PSR (centroid = –.37) and positive associations with high levels of PSR (centroid = .32). Madison et al. (2020) found that these functions were positively associated with exposure. However, only conflict was (negatively) associated with credibility.

Population and Context. The scale was developed using the same sample as the preceding instrument: U.S. college students (N = 276) in reference to their favorite TV personality. Madison et al. (2020) also used this scale on their sample of 584 respondents from a crowdsourcing platform, examining their PSR with *Infowars*' Alex Jones.

Recommendation. Unlike other PSR and PSI scales, this scale examines the functions of the PSRs. The scale has the potential to be useful in uses and gratifications research that assumes media users' awareness of their needs and the ability to report them. Further research should validate the scale relative to PSI, PSR, and general media uses and gratifications. Moreover, additional research is needed to validate the scale in more diverse populations and across different media contexts (e.g., fictional characters vs. celebrities).

Celebrity Worship Scale and Celebrity Attitude Scale

Scale Description. The Celebrity Worship Scale (CWS) was developed in several publications using two names: CWS (McCutcheon et al., 2002) and Celebrity Attitude Scale

(CAS; Maltby & McCutcheon, 2001; Maltby et al., 2006). The full measure included 34 items that have been reduced to 27 (Maltby et al., 2006) or 17 items (McCutcheon et al., 2002). The scale comprises three factors. The first factor, *entertainment–social*, encompasses normative fandom, whereas the other two subscales, *intense personal* and *borderline pathological*, cover problematic behaviors that are not characteristic of fandom or PSEs overall (see Chapter 9). See Box 4.8 for a complete list of items.

Box 4.8 Celebrity Worship Scale and Celebrity Attitude Scale

Location

Maltby, J., Day, L., McCutcheon, L. E., Houran, J., & Ashe, D. (2006). Extreme celebrity worship, fantasy proneness and dissociation. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *40*(2), 273–283. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2005.07.004

Items and Instructions

Measured on a 5-point Likert scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree.*

MFC = My favorite celebrity.

Entertainment–Social

1. If I were to meet MFC in person, he/she would already somehow know that I am his/her biggest fan
2. One of the main reasons I maintain an interest in MFC is that doing so gives me a temporary escape from life's problems
3. MFC is practically perfect in every way
4. I share with MFC a special bond that cannot be described in words
5. To know MFC is to love him/her
6. When something bad happens to MFC I feel like it happened to me
7. When MFC fails or loses at something I feel like a failure myself
8. The successes of MFC are my successes too
9. I consider MFC to be my soul mate
10. When MFC dies (or died) I will feel (or I felt) like dying too
11. If someone gave me several thousand dollars to do with as I please, I would consider spending it on a personal possession (like a napkin or paper plate) once used by MFC
12. When something good happens to MFC I feel like it happened to me
13. I am obsessed by details of MFCs life
14. I have pictures and/or souvenirs of MFC which I always keep in exactly the same place*

Intense–Personal

15. I love to talk with others who admire MFC
16. Keeping up with news about MFC is an entertaining pastime
17. It is enjoyable just to be with others who like MFC
18. I enjoy watching, reading, or listening to MFC because it means a good time
19. Learning the life story of MFC is a lot of fun
20. I like watching and hearing about MFC when I am with a large group of people
21. My friends and I like to discuss what MFC has done

Borderline–Pathological

22. I would gladly die in order to save the life of MFC
23. If I were lucky enough to meet MFC, and he/she asked me to do something illegal as a favor, I would probably do it
24. If I walked through the door of MFCs home without an invitation she or he would be happy to see me
25. I have frequent thoughts about my celebrity, even when I don't want to
26. I often feel compelled to learn the personal habits of MFC
27. MFC would immediately come to my rescue if I needed help
28. MFC and I have our own code so we can communicate with each other secretly (such as over the TV or special words on the radio)
29. If MFC was accused of committing a crime that accusation would have to be false*

*Indicates reverse coding.

Reliability. The scales produced acceptable reliability (Maltby et al., 2006). Study 1: $\alpha_{\text{Entertainment-social}} = .79$, $\alpha_{\text{intense-personal}} = .88$, and $\alpha_{\text{borderline-pathological}} = .70$; Study 2: $\alpha_{\text{Entertainment-social}} = .83$, $\alpha_{\text{intense-personal}} = .84$, and $\alpha_{\text{borderline-pathological}} = .74$. Other studies reported alphas ranging from .71 to .96 (e.g., Giles & Maltby, 2004; Maltby et al., 2002; Maltby & Day, 2011; Maltby & McCutcheon, 2001).

Validity. In Maltby et al. (2006), two components with five items were left out due to low factor loadings or unclear conceptual relationships between items loading on the same factor. The items omitted from the final scale were the following:

Component 4

1. If MFC endorsed a legal but possibly unsafe drug designed to make someone feel good, I would try it
2. News about my celebrity is a pleasant break from a harsh world
3. If MFC found me sitting in his/her car, he or she would be upset

Component 5

1. It would be great if MFC and I were locked in a room for a few days
2. If MFC saw me in a restaurant he/she would ask me to sit down and talk

Giles and Maltby (2004) reported that PCA only yielded two, rather than three, factors, but then treated the scale as a unidimensional construct. Maltby et al. (2002) reported analyses using both the discrete dimensions of the scale and a composite scale that aggregated items across the three dimensions.

Population. Research using CAS and CWS relied mostly on general samples of adults in the United Kingdom (e.g., Maltby et al., 2006, Study 1: Midlands and North England, aged 14–62; Maltby & McCutcheon, 2001: volunteer community groups and

church groups in South Yorkshire, England, mean age 27 years old). The scale was also used on a sample of adolescents aged between 11 and 16 years old in the United Kingdom (Giles & Maltby, 2004).

Context. The CAS and CWS have been used in reference to the participant's favorite celebrity (Giles & Maltby, 2004; Maltby et al., 2006; Maltby & McCutcheon, 2001). Maltby and Day (2011) asked participants specifically to select a living same-sex celebrity whose body the participant admired since the study examined effects of celebrities on cosmetic surgery.

Recommendation. CAS/CWS highlight pathological aspects of PSEs that are not characteristic of PSEs overall and that might add to the stigmatization of these normative experiences (see Chapter 9). Nonetheless, the scale may be suitable when the researchers are specifically interested in examining deviant behaviors and studying particular populations.

The following measures are used to assess specific types of PSRs.

Parasocial Friendship

Scale Description. The PSF (parasocial friendship) scale is one of the two Multiple PSRs scales. It includes two factors: communication (6 items) and support (7 items). The items have been developed based on measures of friendship in interpersonal contexts. It is specifically designed to assess intimacy through communication (e.g., disclosing personal things to the media figure) and emotional support (e.g., be there for the media figure in times of need). When asking about fictional characters, Tukachinsky (2011) started the items by premising "If X was a real person"; however, the scale was also used without this verbiage. See Box 4.9 for a complete list of items.

Reliability. The scale consistently yields good reliability. In the original study: α_{Support} = .89, $\alpha_{\text{Communication}}$ = .86. The measure has been used unidimensionally by Rasmussen and Ewoldsen (2016) in a study of U.S. parents (α = .86) and by Baldwin and Raney (2021) in a sample of U.S. undergraduates (α = .96).

Validity. Tukachinsky (2011) reported that the two subscales correlate well with Rubin's PSI-Scale (support: r = .48, communication: r = .56). Participants reported higher PSF than PSL (romantic PSRs) with characters that respondents stated they think of as a friend (vs. have romantic feelings toward) and with same-sex figures (vs. opposite sex media figures). The scale has been validated in exploratory and then confirmatory factor analysis using a separate sample.

Baldwin and Raney (2021) reported a moderate positive correlation between the PSF scale and viewing intentions (Experimental condition: r = .35, Control condition: r = .45) and between PSF and enjoyment (r = .35, and r = .44). PSF had a weaker correlation with PSI (r = .22 and r = .27), providing evidence of discriminant validity.

Population. The scale was initially used with a sample of college students in the southwestern United States (Study 1, N = 90; Study 2, N = 64). It has since been used more generally, such as a sample of *Dr. Phil* viewers (Rasmussen & Ewoldsen, 2016).

Box 4.9 Parasocial Friendship

Location

Tukachinsky, R. H. (2011). Para-romantic love and para-friendships: Development and assessment of a multiple-parasocial relationships scale. *American Journal of Media Psychology*, *3*(1/2), 73–94.

Items and Instructions

Measured on a 7-point scale (from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*).

Communication

1. I could have disclosed things about myself honestly, fully (deeply) to X
2. I could have disclosed a great deal of things about myself to X
3. Sometimes, I wish I knew what X would do in my situation
4. I could have disclosed positive things about myself honestly and fully (deeply) to X
5. Sometimes, I wish I could ask X for advice
6. I think X could be a friend of mine

Support

1. I would be able to count on X in times of need
2. I would give X emotional support
3. X would be able to count on me in times of need
4. I would share my possessions with X
5. I could trust X completely
6. I could have a warm relationship with X
7. I want to promote his/her well-being

Context. The scale was constructed by using "favorite television figure" (Tukachinsky, 2011, Study 1) and one of four popular celebrity actors (Tukachinsky, 2011, Study 2). Subsequent studies used a specific fictional character (Baldwin & Raney, 2021) and a talk show host (Rasmussen & Ewoldsen, 2016).

Recommendation. PSRs are frequently referred to as a sense of intimacy at a distance, and scholars recognize that similar, if not identical, mental machinery operates when a viewer orients to a PSR as with a true social relationship. Thus, examining a parasocial version of dynamics typically found in social relationships, such as feelings of friendship, is reasonable. Tukachinsky's scale focuses on two facets of (parasocial) friendship: desires to self-disclose and feeling supported. Certain items seem less restricted to self-disclosure and may overlap with feelings of general friendship (e.g., "I think X could be a friend of mine"), so users of this instrument might keep this in mind if they are also employing other measures of general PSR. However, we see promise in the current effort, and we look forward to future testing and validation of this scale.

Parasocial Love

Scale Description. The PSL (Parasocial Love) scale (Tukachinsky, 2011) is one of the two multiple PSR scales. Because the term "love" is broad and can encompass a variety of types

of relationships, the scale was later referred to as a measure of PSRR (parasocial romantic relationship). The scale includes two factors: physical (four items) and emotional (seven items). The items have been developed based on measures of romantic relationships in interpersonal context.

Several researchers used Tukachinsky's (2011) scale with modifications, including additional items or replacing certain items. Tukachinsky Forster (2021) incorporated some of these changes in the physical scale to emphasize the relational aspect of the experience (e.g., instead of reading, "The media figure is physically attractive," the revised statement reads, "I am physically attractive to the media figure"). Additionally, in order to keep the physical and the emotional dimensions distinct, the word "physically" has been removed from the emotional PSL item, "I want X to know me physically, emotionally and mentally." See Box 4.10 for a complete list of items.

Box 4.10 Parasocial Love

Location

Tukachinsky, R. H. (2011). Para-romantic love and para-friendships: Development and assessment of a multiple-parasocial relationships scale. *American Journal of Media Psychology*, *3*(1/2), 73–94.

Tukachinsky Forster, R. (2021). *Parasocial romantic relationships: Falling in love with media figures.* Lexington Press.

Items and Instructions

Measured on a 7-point Likert scale (from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*).

Emotional

1. I want X physically, emotionally, and mentally[a]
2. For me, X could be the perfect romantic partner
3. Sometimes I think that X and I are just meant for each other
4. I wish X could know my thoughts, my fears, and my hopes
5. X influences my mood
6. I adore X
7. I idealize X

Physical

8. I find X very attractive physically[b]
9. I think X is quite handsome/pretty[b]
10. X is very sexy looking[c]
11. X fits my ideal standards of physical beauty/handsomeness[d]

[a] Revised scale: omit "physically."
[b] Revised scale: Replace both items by "I was physically attracted to X."
[c] Revised scale: "I imagined being with X sexually."
[d] Revised scale: "I wished we could be involved in a sexual relationship."

Reliability. Tukachinsky (2011) reported good reliability ($\alpha_{emotional}$ = .84, $\alpha_{physical}$ = .92). Liebers (2022), using the scale on a German sample, reported α = .86 in Study 1 for an emotional scale that also contained two items from Schramm and Hartmann (2008). In Study 2, the reliabilities were similar: $\alpha_{emotional}$ = .86, $\alpha_{physical}$ = .93.

Validity. Tukachinsky (2011) found that participants reported higher PSL than PSF with characters that respondents stated they are "in love with" or "have a crush on" (vs. think of as a friend) and with opposite-sex figures (vs. same-sex media figures). The scale has been validated in EFA and then a CFA on a separate sample. Liebers's (2022) scales correlate with Rubin's PSI-Scale ($r_{physical}$ = .64 and $r_{emotional}$ = .83). The two-dimensional structure of PSL has been replicated in later studies, and the two dimensions predict different outcomes (e.g., Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018) and relate differently to personality variables (Liebers, 2022).

Population. The scale was developed using college students in a southwestern U.S. university. The scale then was used on a sample of U.S. adults (Tukachinsky Forster, 2021), U.S. teens aged 13–17 (Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018), and a sample of West Coast university students (Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018). The scale was translated into Chinese and validated (Hu et al., 2022) using a sample of students in a large public university in eastern China; applied to college students in Germany (Liebers & Schramm, 2022); given to a sample of moviegoers in Germany (Liebers, 2022, Study 1); and completed by a crowdsourcing sample in Germany (Liebers, 2022, Study 2). The scale has been successfully used on both men and women, heterosexual and LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) individuals with no significant differences observed between these gender and sexual orientation groups (Tukachinsky Forster, 2021).

Context. The original study (Tukachinsky, 2011) developed the scale using the respondents' favorite media figure (Study 1) and a randomly assigned celebrity (Study 2). Subsequent studies asked participants to select a media figure they have a romantic parasocial relationship with (Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018; Tukachinsky Forster, 2021). Liebers and Schramm (2022) asked participants to respond with reference to a fictional character in a movie they have just watched and whose sex matched the participant's sexual orientation.

Recommendation. The scale performs well in assessing romantic PSRs. It appears that it is important to maintain the distinction between the two dimensions of this PSE and not combine the two subscales since they may relate differently to predictors and outcome variables. However, there is some inconsistency in the wording of the scale and the modifications, and there is a troubling number of variations of the scale in use (e.g., Tukachinsky Forster's 2021 modification or Liebers and Hartmann's using two items from Gliech's translation of Rubin's scale with two items from the PSL scale: "For me, X could be the perfect romantic partner" and "Sometimes I think that X and I are just meant for each other"). Further validation of the updated physical subscale is needed. Until then, it would be advisable to include both old and new items when utilizing the scale.

Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments Scale

Scale Description. The 10-item Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments (ARPA) scale includes three dimensions: cognitive (three items), affective experience (three items), and fantasy (four items). The items were developed based on focus groups with young adult women. See Box 4.11 for a complete list of items.

Reliability. Erickson and Dal Cin (2018) reported adequate reliabilities: $\alpha_{cognition}$ = .75, $\alpha_{emotion}$ = .82, and $\alpha_{fantasy}$ = .83.

Validity. Erickson and Dal Cin reported a strong ($r = .74$, $p < .01$) correlation between the 10-item ARPA scale and Tukachinsky's (2011) Multiple PSR that combines all of the items across all four dimensions of romantic (PSL) and friendship (PSF) scales and their corresponding subscales. Thus, the ARPA scale captures both passionate and companionate aspects of the PSE. The three dimensions of the ARPA scale had almost identical correlations with other variables. Thus, the scale has been treated as unidimensional.

Population. The scale has been used on a sample of U.S. female college students (N = 376, 80% white, 76.3% predominantly heterosexual orientation, 57.0% religious [47.6% Christian]). Only participants who had a celebrity crush or really liked/followed a particular celebrity in adolescence were included in the sample.

Context. Female college students were asked to reflect on their favorite celebrity or their celebrity crush at the time they were 12–14 years old.

Box 4.11 Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments (ARPA) Scale

Location

Erickson, S. E., & Dal Cin, S. (2018). Romantic parasocial attachments and the development of romantic scripts, schemas and beliefs among adolescents. *Media Psychology*, *21*(1), 111–136.

Items and Instructions

Measured on a 7-point Likert scale from *Not at all like me* to *Just like me*.

Cognitive

1. I wanted to know as much as I could about [this person].
2. I wanted to help support [this person]'s career.
3. I felt that [this person] and I had a lot in common.

Affective Experience

4. My relationship with [this person] made me feel happy.
5. When good things happened to [this person], I was excited.
6. When bad things happened to [this person], it upset me.

Fantasy

7. I often daydreamed about [this person].
8. I imagined that [this person] would someday pick me out of a crowd and see me as special.
9. I imagined conversations I would have with [this person] if we ever met.
10. I imagined what it would be like to marry [this person].

Recommendation. The scale makes an important contribution by emphasizing the fantasy elements of romantic PSRs. It is also admirable that the measure was developed to accommodate younger respondents. However, the utility of the three-factorial structure is unclear and needs further validation. Currently, the scale has been used as a unidimensional construct that highly correlates with the Multiple PSR Scale. The PSL scales in the Multiple PSR Scale, however, appear to have more granularity, with different dimensions of that scale predicting different outcomes (see section on Tukachinsky's PSL scale in this chapter). The advantages of the ARPA scale over the PSL scale, and its overall validity, are not clear.

PSR-Political Scale

Scale Description. The PSR-Political (PSR-P) scale (Hakim & Liu, 2021) that originally consisted of seven items has been reduced to four. See Box 4.12 for a complete list of items.

Reliability. Based on EFA results, after removing three items, a unidimensional scale with appropriate factor loadings was created and verified with a CFA. The scale had an acceptable reliability in the United States (α = .77) and New Zealand (α = .73) but low reliability in the Indonesian sample (α = .41).

Validity. The PSR-P correlated positively with Rubin's PSI-Scale (r = .60) and less so with the PSI process scale (r = .45).

Population and Context. The scale has been validated in samples of adults from the United States, New Zealand, and Indonesia in reference to the respondent's favorite national political figure.

Recommendation. Although we appreciate the compact nature of this measure, the PSR-P unfortunately appears to have lower internal consistency compared to other, more established measures of PSR. From a validity standpoint, the items on the scale appear to tap into other theoretical constructs, such as trust, liking, and support (see Chapter 15 for discussion of this matter). It is also not clear what the advantage is of this scale

Box 4.12 PSR-Political

Location

Hakim, M. A., & Liu, J. H. (2021). Development, construct validity, and measurement invariance of the parasocial relationship with political figures (PSR-P) scale. *International Perspectives in Psychology*, *10*, 13–24.

Items and Instructions

Agreement measured on a 7-point Likert scale from *Completely Disagree* to *Completely Agree*.

1. I am very sympathetic to what he or she wants to achieve.
2. I find his or her life story to be inspiring.
3. I would love to have dinner with him or her.
4. I am moved by his or her speeches.

being designated as a political PSR scale, versus applying an existing general PSR scale to a political context. For instance, J. Cohen and Holbert (2021) used a subset of items from Rubin's PSI-Scale to assess political PSRs with four political leaders. It remains to be demonstrated how the PSR-P scale performs relative to general PSR scales. Specifically, it is not clear if it captures unique aspects of a PSR in a political context and whether the PSR-P scale has a better predictive power than alternative measures. Thus, at a minimum, we would wait for additional development on this scale before recommending its use.

PSR With Characters and Performers

Scale Description. The PSR With Characters (PSR-C) and PSR With Performers (PSR-Pr) scales (Slater et al., 2018) examine "offline" PSRs with media figures. It conceptualizes PSR as the subjective experience of the character or the performer as a part of the media consumer's social circle outside the media realms. The same items are asked twice—once about actors and once about fictional characters. They do not refer to any specific character but to a general propensity to have these experiences with media personalities. Short and long versions of the scale have been designed (see Box 4.13 for both sets of items).

Box 4.13 PSR With Characters and Performers

Location

Slater, M. D., Ewoldsen, D. R., & Woods, K. W. (2018). Extending conceptualization and measurement of narrative engagement after-the-fact: Parasocial relationship and retrospective imaginative involvement. *Media Psychology*, *21*(3), 329–351. https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2017.1328313

Items and Instructions

Items in italics used in short version scale.

Parasocial Relationships With Characters

1. *I like to imagine my favorite TV short or movie characters as people I know personally.*
2. *I often feel like characters from my favorite TV short or movies are people I know and care about.*
3. *I like to talk to others about what my favorite TV show or movie characters are like as people.*
4. Seeing my favorite characters in a TV show or movie is like seeing good friends.
5. I like to talk to others about what we would have done if we were the character.
6. I'm often fascinated by my favorite TV show or movie characters as people.

Parasocial Relationships With Performers

1. *I like to imagine my favorite actors or actresses as people I know personally.*
2. *I sometimes imagine my favorite actors or actresses as my friends or romantic partners in the setting of the TV show or movie.*
3. I sometimes imagine my favorite actors or actresses as my friends or romantic partners in social settings outside of the TV show or movie.
4. *I like to talk to others about what my favorite actors or actresses are like as people.*
5. Seeing my favorite actors and actresses in TV shows and movies is like seeing good friends.
6. I'm often fascinated by my favorite actors or actresses as people.

Reliability. Both the character and the performer scales had high reliabilities: PSR-C α = .92, and PSR With Performers α = .94, for PSR. When combined, α = .96. In a later study by Silver and Slater (2019) similarly good reliability was reported (α = .93).

Validity. The scale has been validated using an exploratory factor analysis followed by a confirmatory factor analysis. The items about imagining the actors/characters as friends or romantic partners had to be eliminated due to cross-loading. The PSR-C, PSR With Performers, and transportation scales were distinguished appropriately. The scales were highly correlated with other related traits: transportability (PSR-C r = .71, PSR-P r = .63) and retrospective imaginary involvement (PSR-C, r = .65; PSR-Pr, r = .62). Silver and Slater (2019) report similarly high correlations between the new scale and transportability and retrospective imaginary involvement (r = .70 and .71, respectively). The correlation with overall time spent watching TV was small but significant (r = .18).

Population and Context. The scale has been validated and then used again (Silver & Slater, 2019) on a quota sample of U.S. adults. The distribution of sex and race in the sample approximated that of the national population.

Recommendation. The scale offers two important innovations. It is the first measure to distinguish between the actors and characters, allowing future researchers to uncover possible unique, additive, or interactive effects between the two. The scale also makes a first step toward conceptualizing trait PSR—a general propensity to form PSRs or having "chronic" PSRs as opposed to situational or exposure-specific PSRs.

Parasocial Perception Scale

Scale Description. The Parasocial Perception scale (PSP; Riles & Adams, 2021) adds a reciprocity component to the PSR experience by examining media user's beliefs about how the media figure relates to their audiences. The five items were adapted from Wiemer et al. (2016). See Box 4.14 for a complete list of items.

Box 4.14 Location

Riles, J. M., & Adams, K. (2021). Me, myself, and my mediated ties: Parasocial experiences as an ego-driven process. *Media Psychology*, *24*(6), 792-813. https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2020.1811124

Items and Instructions:

Agreement measured on a 7-point Likert scale (from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree)*
This person values their fans very little.*
Audience members matter very little to this person.*
When producing content, this person takes his/her fans into consideration.
Audience members are valued by this person.
This person cares about their fans.

* Reverse coded item

Reliability. The measure had good reliability (α = .86).

Validity. PSP had a strong correlation with PSR (r = .41) but even stronger correlation with wishful identification (r = .54).

Population. College student sample.

Context. Favorite media figure that the participants saw in the last month.

Recommendation. All of the previously discussed PSR measures examine the media users' cognitions and emotions about the media figure. However, this approach overlooked the illusion of reciprocity in the PSR. The PSP scale uniquely considers the media users' perception of the media figure's relationship to the media users. This is an important and interesting addition to the conceptualization of PSRs. However, it is important to establish better differentiation between PSP and other forms of involvement. Further research is needed to better understand how PSP works alongside traditional measures of PSR. For instance, should they be considered two factors under a superordinate PSR latent factor? Do PSP and PSR predict the same outcomes in the context of persuasion and effects on self?

PSI-Process Scales

Scale Description. The PSI-Process Scales were designed in response to the confusion between PSI and PSR in previous measures of PSEs, and they aim specifically to capture the interactive aspects of PSEs. The measure comprises 14 subscales (112 items) that can be grouped into cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses. Schramm and Hartmann (2008) suggested that researchers can use the entire instrument or only some of the subscales depending on the focus of their particular study. The scales' authors also noted that although some researchers combine scores across subscales to create a grand PSI score, they advise treating each dimension separately. See Box 4.15 for a complete list of items.

Reliability. Schramm and Hartmann (2008) reported acceptable reliabilities on the subscales: *Cognitive*: attention allocation α = .76, comprehension of persona's action and situation α = .85, activation of prior media and life experience α = .76, evaluations of persona and persona's actions α = .82, anticipatory observation α = .86, construction of relations between persona and self α = .86. *Affective*: sympathy α = .77, antipathy α = .88, empathy α = .80, counterempathy α = 69, emotional contagion α = .83. *Behavioral*: nonverbal behavior (e.g., mimics, gestures) α = .78, (para-)verbal behavior α = .79, behavioral intention α = .79.

Some have used the scale as unidimensional. For example, So and Shen (2016) used nine items (four were removed because confirmatory factor analyses yielded a unidimensional structure), resulting in an acceptable reliability, α = .77; Liebers and Schramm (2022) used eight items as a single scale, with α = .72; and Kyewski et al. (2018) combined 52 items into a single scale with a reliability of α = .91. Conversely, Beege et al. (2019) used 30 (Study 1) and 34 (Study 2) items and treated them as a three-dimensional

Box 4.15 PSI-Process Scales

Location

Schramm, H., & Hartmann, T. (2008). The PSI-Process Scales. A new measure to assess the intensity and breadth of parasocial processes. *European Journal of Communication Research*, *33*(4), 385–401. https://doi.org/10.1515/COMM.2008.025

Schramm, H., & Hartmann, T. (2019). *German and English version of PSI Process Scales: Short Documentation and Instructions for Application*. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.29690.82884/1

Items and Instructions

PSI-Process Scales items are measured on a 5-point Likert scale from *Not at All* to *Very Much.*

Cognitive response

Persona-specific Information Reception

Depth of information processing and vividness of recall

1. I can still remember exactly what (Persona) looked like.
2. The picture of (Persona) is still vivid in my mind.
3. I formed only a fleeting impression of (Persona).
4. I barely noticed how (Persona) behaved.

Attention

5. (Persona) repeatedly attracted my entire attention.
6. I watched closely how (Persona) behaved.
7. I didn't really notice (Persona).
8. I rarely paid attention to (Persona).

Comprehension of the Situation and of the Acts of Persona

Logical Comprehension

1. I made an effort to comprehend the reactions of (Persona).
2. I tried to understand the acts of (Persona).
3. I hardly thought about why (Persona) did certain things.
4. I hardly thought about the meaning of (Persona's) acts.

Reflection About Persona/Arrangement

5. I intensely thought about the behavior of (Persona).
6. I repeatedly pictured (Persona's) situation in my mind.
7. I did not think about (Persona's) situation one bit.
8. I rarely wondered about the consistency of (Persona's) behavior.

Linking Persona's Statements/Actions to One's Own Memories

Tie Between One's Own Experiences or Acquaintances

1. I repeatedly pondered whether I know people who resemble (Persona).
2. I have wondered every once in a while, whether I have been in similar situations as (Persona).
3. (Persona) did not trigger any memories in me.
4. I have rarely pondered whether I have ever been in similar circumstances as (Persona).

Comparison to Person-Specific Previous Knowledge

5. Every once in a while, I have pondered previous incidences in which (Persona) has behaved similarly.
6. I have occasionally recalled all the things I know about (Persona).
7. I have rarely thought about whether (Persona's) behavior is typical of him/her.
8. I have rarely thought about how I memorized (Persona).

Evaluation of Persona and His/Her Actions

1. I repeatedly assessed whether I like or dislike the comments and the behavior of (Persona).
2. I have formed an opinion about (Persona).
3. I repeatedly pondered what to think about (Persona).
4. I have noticed characteristics about (Persona), which I like or dislike.
5. I did not consider how one should evaluate the behavior of (Persona).
6. It was not important to me to judge (Persona's) behavior.
7. I did not form an opinion about the things that (Persona) said or did during the show.
8. It did not seem necessary to me to form an opinion about (Persona).

Consideration About the Near Future of Persona

Anticipation of Persona's Acts

1. I often put effort into anticipating how (Persona) will behave.
2. I repeatedly tried to guess what (Persona) will do or say next.
3. I have actually never thought about what (Persona) might do or say next.
4. I rarely had any expectations about how (Persona) will behave next.

Anticipation of Persona's Fate

5. I have often thought about what the future holds for (Persona).
6. I often had ideas about how things would develop for (Persona).
7. I did not concern myself with what could happen to (Persona) during the course of the show.
8. I rarely made assumptions about what could happen to (Persona).

Establishment of a Relationship Between Persona and the Self

1. While observing (Persona), I repeatedly considered whether I would have done a better or worse job than him/her.
2. Every once in a while, I have thought about whether (Persona) is similar or dissimilar to me.
3. I have considered what unites me with, and what distinguishes me from (Persona).
4. I frequently had thoughts such as "I would like to do this like (Persona)" or "I definitely don't want to do this like (Persona)."
5. I was neither excited about nor agitated by what (Persona) has said or done.
6. I have rarely thought about whether I personally would have acted in the same way as (Persona).
7. I did not compare myself to (Persona).
8. I have actually never wondered whether (Persona) has something to do with me.

Affective Response

Sympathy

1. There were moments in which I admired (Persona) very much.
2. Occasionally, I downright loved (Persona) for what he/she has said or done.

3. I found (Persona) to be likable.
4. One simply has to like (Persona).
5. I couldn't say anymore whether I had positive feelings towards (Persona).
6. (Persona) did not particularly call forth affection in me.
7. I did not feel particularly sympathetic towards (Persona).
8. I neither liked nor admired (Persona) for what he/she has said or done.

Antipathy

1. There were moments in which I despised (Persona) very much.
2. Occasionally, I hated (Persona) for what he/she has said or done.
3. I found (Persona) to be particularly dislikable.
4. I felt rather negative towards (Persona).
5. I did not find particularly objectionable what (Persona) has said or done.
6. I did not link any particularly negative feelings to (Persona).
7. I did not feel any particular aversion towards (Persona).
8. I couldn't say anymore whether I hated (Persona).

Empathy

1. I always felt compassion for (Persona).
2. When (Persona) was doing badly, I was also doing badly; when (Persona) was doing well, I was also doing well.
3. I could easily have determined how (Persona) felt in various situations.
4. In some situations it seemed to me as if I felt the same emotions as (Persona).
5. I could only rarely empathize with the mood of (Persona).
6. I could not comprehend the feelings (Persona) showed.
7. I demonstrated little empathy towards (Persona).
8. I would have been unable to say whether (Persona) felt well or badly.

Counter-empathy

1. I was hoping that (Persona) would get the "proper punishment" for what he/she has said or done.
2. I was continuously and gloatingly waiting for something bad to happen to (Persona).
3. When (Persona) was doing badly, I was doing well; when (Persona) was doing well, I was doing badly.
4. I was unable to develop any benevolent feelings towards (Persona).
5. It wasn't important to me whether something bad happened to (Persona).
6. I did not feel any joy/would have felt no joy when something bad happened/if something bad had happened to (Persona).
7. I did not feel the need to gloat when (Persona) was miserable.
8. I more or less didn't care when (Persona) was doing badly.

Emotion Release

Emotion Contagion

1. When (Persona) showed up, I forgot my own feelings and adopted his/her mood.
2. (Persona's) feelings were sometimes contagious.
3. I had the impression that (Persona's) mood was rarely transferred to me.
4. The feelings, which I observed (Persona) went through, were not contagious.

Emotion Induction

5. The behavior of (Persona) had a strong influence on my own mood.
6. I occasionally reacted very emotionally towards (Persona).
7. What (Persona) has said or done did not trigger any emotions in me.
8. I reacted rather matter-of-factly and emotionally unfazed towards (Persona).

Behavioral Response

Nonverbal Behaviors

Body Posture and Movement

1. My reaction towards (Persona) was downright physical.
2. Whenever (Persona) was visible, I directed my entire attention towards him/her.
3. Everything that (Persona) has said or done left me simply motionless.
4. (Persona) triggered no physical movement in me.

Mimicry and Gestures

5. I sometimes gestured towards (Persona).
6. Others could have read from my face how I reacted on certain things (Persona) has said or done.
7. I neither expressed my opinion about (Persona) via my facial expression nor via gestures.
8. My facial expression did not give away what was going through my head about (Persona).

(Para-)Verbal Behaviors

1. In certain moments, I spontaneously said something to (Persona).
2. I repeatedly and audibly made remarks towards (Persona); for example, through a snide comment or an approving word.
3. In some situations, I spoke for (Persona) while he/she was silent.
4. I occasionally shouted something at (Persona).
5. I never audibly verbalized my opinion about what (Persona) has said or done.
6. I rarely commented audibly what impression (Persona) left on me.
7. I barely remember any comments that I made towards (Persona).
8. When (Persona) was visible on the TV screen, I did not make any remarks towards him/her.

Behavioral Intention

1. I sometimes would have loved to say something to (Persona).
2. In some instances I would have liked to contact (Persona).
3. I often wished I could express my opinion to (Persona).
4. I was often close to expressing my thoughts about (Persona) with the appropriate facial expression and gesture.
5. I never intended to react to (Persona).
6. I never felt like commenting on (Persona's) actions.
7. When (Persona) was visible on the screen, I was not particularly eager to turn towards him/her.
8. I did not feel the desire to react to (Persona).

construct with cognitive (ω = .90 Study 1, ω = .76 Study 2), affective (ω = .81 Study 1, ω = .85 Study 2), and behavioral (ω = .78 Study 1, ω = .70 Study 2) facets.

Validity. Schramm and Hartman (2008) reported intercorrelations between the items to be at least $r = .30$. The subscales had positive correlations with other related constructs. Cognitive responses significantly correlated with obtrusiveness ($r = .24$, $p < .01$); physical attractiveness of persona ($r = .26$, $p < .01$); character attractiveness of persona ($r = .32$, $p < .01$); presence ($r = .27$, $p < .01$); persistence ($r = .16$, $p < .05$); and task attractiveness of persona ($r = .19$, $p < .05$). Affective responses correlated with physical attractiveness of persona ($r = .48$, $p < .01$); character attractiveness of persona ($r = .68$, $p < .01$); task attractiveness of persona ($r = .44$, $p < .01$); presence ($r = .33$, $p < .01$); and persistence ($r = .15$, $p < .05$). Behavioral responses significantly correlated with persistence ($r = .15$, $p < .05$) and presence ($r = .15$, $p < .05$). Kyewski et al. (2018) reported a positive relationship between frequency of watching and PSI.

Population. The scales were developed using a sample of German and Swiss participants ($N = 237$, 47% females) aged 14–72 years old ($M = 30$).They have been utilized mostly in German college student samples (Kyewski et al., 2018; Liebers & Schramm, 2022), but also in a United States college student sample (So & Shen, 2016).

Context. Schramm and Hartmann (2008) randomly assigned participants to select the media persona from a selected a TV genre they liked or did not like. The scales were used to measure responses to clips from popular TV shows, such as *Sex and the City* (So & Shen, 2016), popular movies the participants have seen in the past (e.g., *The Proposal*; Liebers & Schramm, 2022), and social television (*About Kate*; Kyewski et al., 2018). Finally, Beege et al. (2019) used the scales to measure responses to an instructional video that they developed for the study and varied the speaker's attire and orientation.

Recommendation. The PSI-Process Scales represent the utmost comprehensive tool for assessing PSIs, unmatched by any other PSI measures available. These scales have the unique advantage of addressing multiple facets of the PSE, including cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses, with measures of specific dimensions within each class of responses. This makes the PSI-Process Scales an ideal tool for testing nuanced theoretical mechanisms that postulate that specific aspects of the PSE operate in distinct ways. The scales also make an incredibly important contribution to research by affording examination of nonamicable aspects of PSEs. Some subscales specifically tap into negative PSIs (counterempathy, antiempathy) while others are worded in general terms, allowing researchers, e.g. to assess PSIs regardless of their valance (e.g., verbal responses and behavioral intentions that could pertain to both positive and negative reactions).

However, inevitably, such a thorough measure is very lengthy and was not intended to be used in its entirety. Consequently, there is considerable variability in how researchers utilize the measure, with each scholar using a different subset of the scale that is relevant to their particular project. This adds a layer of complication to comparing and generalizing

across studies. It is also noteworthy that the empathy subscale somewhat overlaps with the theoretical construct and commonly used measure of character identification (J. Cohen, 2001). Taken together, then, the PSI Process Scales offer a vital tool for operationalizing specific aspects of PSI on a particularly high resolution. Although not all research projects may require this level of granularity, researchers will be well served to include subscales of these experiences as pertains to their theoretical questions.

Experience of Parasocial Interaction Scale

Scale Description. The six-item Experience of Parasocial Interaction (EPSI) (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011) measure specifically focuses on interactive aspects of the PSE. With this measure, the authors recalibrated the measurement of PSI, and the study of PSI more broadly, by revisiting and reclaiming Horton and Wohl's (1956) original focus on the viewer's one-sided perception of being in a reciprocal social encounter with the mediated persona. The first three items on the scale represent users' perceived mutual awareness with the TV performer, four items represent mutual attention, and Items 5 and 6 represent impressions of mutual adjustment. Items were written first in Dutch and translated to English for the article. See Box 4.16 for a complete list of items.

Reliability. The scale had good reliability (α = .87). Later studies yielded even higher reliabilities: Cummins and Cui (2014): α = .93; J. Cohen et al. (2019): α = .96; Dibble et al. (2016): α = .92; Semmler et al. (2015): α = .96; Tukachinsky and Sangalang (2016): α = .96.

Validity. Several studies (e.g., Dibble et al., 2016; Oliver et al., 2019; Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016) have shown that direct address (i.e., breaking the fourth wall [BTFW]) consistently increased ratings on EPSI. Also, as Dibble et al. (2016) found, the EPSI scale

Box 4.16 Experience of Parasocial Interaction (EPSI) Scale

Location

Hartmann, T., & Goldhoorn, C. (2011). Horton and Wohl revisited: Exploring viewers' experience of parasocial interaction. *Journal of Communication*, *61*(6), 1104–1121.

Items and Instructions

Agreement with the items was measured on a 7-point Likert scale from *do not agree at all* to *totally agree*.

While watching the clip, I had the feeling that [name] . . .

1. was aware of me.
2. knew I was there.
3. knew I was aware of him/her.
4. knew I paid attention to him/her.
5. knew that I reacted to him/her.
6. reacted to what I said or did.

correlated less strongly with relational dimensions such as identification and wishful identification (r's = .31–.40) as compared to a more focused measure of PSR, that is, Rubin's PSI-Scale (r's = .55–.63). This suggests that the EPSI scale is not assessing the same thing as the PSI-Scale.

Population. The scale was developed and validated on a sample of Dutch individuals aged 15–78 (N = 198, 66% female, 30.9 mean age). The scale was also used with United States college students (J. Cohen et al., 2019; Semmler et al., 2015; Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016).

Context. The scale has been used to asses PSI with characters on the final episode of *The Biggest Loser* (Cummins & Cui, 2014); fictional characters (e.g., on *House of Cards* and *Dexter*; J. Cohen et al., 2019; Semmler et al., 2015); or media content specifically produced for the study (e.g., Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016). The measure has also been used in true experiments wherein researchers manipulated bodily address (e.g., Dibble et al., 2016; Rosaen et al., 2019; Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016; see the section on PSI manipulation in this chapter). The scale was particularly appropriate for such experimental studies because of its sensitivity to such manipulations and its brevity.

Recommendation. This brief scale shows excellent reliability and validity in capturing the viewers' subjective sense of PSI. The EPSI scale also represents an effort to return researchers to the original conception of PSI as explicated by Horton and Wohl (1956). In order to prevent researchers confusing their scale with other measures that happen to be labeled (perhaps erroneously) with "PSI" and to refocus on PSI as an experience that occurs during the viewing episode, Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) intentionally used the name *Experience* of Parasocial Interaction Scale. However, researchers should be mindful of the fact that, overall, respondents tend to score low on this scale. This is particularly true for media content that was not manipulated to enhance the PSI experience (i.e., fictional media that does not break the fourth wall).

Parasocial Breakup Scale

Scale Description. Items for the Parasocial Breakup (PSB) scale have been developed based on the work of Barbara and Dion (2000) and adapted to assess postbreakup reactions in interpersonal relationships (J. Cohen, 2003). The original scale included 13 items with 2 additional items added by Eyal and Cohen (2006). See Box 4.17 for a complete list of items.

Reliability. J. Cohen (2003) reported acceptable reliability of the Hebrew original version of the scale in three samples in Israel: pretest (α = .77), adults (α = .79), and teens (α = .85). The modified scale performed similarly well in an American college student sample (α = .81). Hu (2016) used five of the items that were relevant to a learned scandal (rather than a show going off the air) on a college student sample. The items included how much the participants felt angry, sad, disappointed, betrayed, and lonely. After removing "lonely" the scale's reliability was .65. Hu et al. (2018) used the same five of J. Cohen's (2003) items

Box 4.17 Parasocial Breakup Scale (PSB)

Location

Cohen, J. (2003). Parasocial breakups: Measuring individual differences in responses to the dissolution of parasocial relationships. *Mass Communication & Society*, *6*(2), 191–202.

Eyal, K., & Cohen, J. (2006). When good friends say goodbye: A parasocial breakup study. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *50*(3), 502–523.

Items and Instructions

Agreement with the statements is measured on a 5-point Likert scale from *Not at all true* to *Very true* in J. Cohen (2003) and *Strongly disagree* to *Strongly agree* in Eyal and Cohen (2006). Other differences between the wording of the items are noted beneath the scale.

If my favorite television personality would be taken off the air, I would . . .

1. Feel lonely
2. Watch another program with the same personality
3. Become less excited about watching TV
4. Watch reruns or taped episodes of the show in which the personality appears
5. Feel like I lost a close friend
6. Feel sad
7. Try to do something to change the situation (e.g., write a letter to the broadcaster)[a]
8. Miss my favorite personality [b]
9. Find a different personality to like
10. Look for information about my favorite personality in other places (e.g., newspapers, Internet, etc.)
11. Feel disappointed
12. Try to meet my favorite personality some other way (e.g., face to face, in movies, shows, etc.) [a]
13. Feel angry

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14. *Tend to think of him or her often* [c]
15. *Feel a void in my life* [c]

[a] Not used by Eyal and Cohen (2006).

[b] Eyal and Cohen (2006) reverse-coded item: "I don't miss him or her as much as I thought I would."

[c] Items included by Eyal and Cohen (2006) that are not in original scale.

in an experiment on a celebrity scandal and produced α = .78. Bostwick and Lookadoo (2017) reported good reliability in PSB with an athlete α = .87. Ellithorpe and Brookes (2018) used J. Cohen's (2003) items on a 0–10 scale with excellent reliability (α = .94)

Validity. A PCA revealed that the scale has two dimensions but the second factor was not well differentiated and lacked theoretical validity. As evidence of discriminant validity, J. Cohen (2003) reported that when subjected to a PCA, Rubin's PSI-Scale and the PSB scale were differentiated well with all, but one item loading solely on their corresponding item (the item "I would look for other program with the same character" loaded strongly

on the PSI factor). As evidence of convergent validity, the scale had a strong positive correlation with PSR intensity (J. Cohen, 2003: $r_{pretest} = .62$, $r_{adults} = .85$, $r_{teens} = .59$; Eyal & Cohen, 2006: $r = .68$).

Population. The original (J. Cohen, 2003) scale was developed in Israel using quota samples of adults and a convenience sample of high school students. The scale was also used on American college students (e.g., Eyal & Cohen, 2006) and in China (Hu, 2016).

Context. The scale has been examined in a context of different types of media figures, including both fictional (e.g., Ellithorpe & Brookes, 2018) and actual celebrities (Bostwick & Lookadoo, 2017). The scale has been applied to different types of PSB. Although initially formulated to deal with a hypothetical situation when a show goes off the air (J. Cohen, 2003), it has been adapted to responding to viewers' responses to celebrity scandals (Hu, 2016) or departure of an athlete from a team (Bostwick & Lookadoo, 2017).

Recommendation. The scale can be adjusted to various contexts of PSB. However, depending on the context and the theoretical premise of the study, researchers can consider alternatives. For instance, in studying media users' coping with the passing of a celebrity, E. L. Cohen and Hoffner (2016) specifically measured grief by looking only at the emotional aspects of the PSB (how heartbroken, depressed, lonely, sad, and anxious they felt). These items are mostly redundant with the PSB scale and do not tap into behavioral and cognitive aspects of this PSE but offer a valid way to tap specifically into the experience of grief. The scale also needs adjustment in order to better capture a PSB that the viewer initiates, for example in response to a celebrity scandal (Hu, 2016). Conceivably, future research can do more to differentiate between these types of experiences.

Finally, we review four scales used to assess PSEs in children.

Parents' Perception of PSR in Children

Scale Description. The Parents' Perception of PSR in Children (Bond & Calvert, 2014) scale has been developed to assess children's PSRs by surveying parents. The scale consists of three subscales: Character Personification, Social Realism, and Attachment. See Box 4.18 for a complete list of items.

Reliability and Validity. Bond and Calvert (2014) did not report alpha reliabilities for their new instrument, but used CFA to validate the three-factorial structure, with a superordinate factor in a CFA yielding a good model fit. The composite scale had a positive correlation with toy engagement ($r = .32$), exposure to the content featuring the character ($r = .28$), and parent encouragement to consume that content ($r = .67$). A replication by Richards and Calvert (2016) yielded a slightly different factorial structure with three factors: (a) social realism, (b) attachment and personification, (c) human-like needs. In their sample, age was not associated with social realism scores.

Population and Context. The scale has been used to assess PSRs with the child's favorite character. It was developed using a sample of 146 parents from the Washington,

Box 4.18 Parents' Perception of PSR in Children

Location

Bond, B. J., & Calvert, S. L. (2014). A model and measure of US parents' perceptions of young children's parasocial relationships. *Journal of Children and Media*, *8*(3), 286–304.

Items and Instructions

Character Personification

1. [Child] thinks that [character] has thoughts and emotions
2. [Child] gets sad when [character] gets sad or makes a mistake
3. [Child] trusts [character]
4. [Child] treats [character] as a friend
5. [Child] believes that [character] has needs
6. [Child] believes that [character] has wants

Social Realism

7. [Child] knows that [character] is imaginary*
8. When [character] acts out a behavior on screen (like dancing, singing, or playing a game), [child] believes that [character] is performing the behavior in real life
9. [Child] believes that [character] is real

Attachment

10. [Character] makes [child] feel comfortable
11. [Character] makes [child] feel safe
12. The voice of [character] soothes [child]

* Reverse coded.

D.C., metropolitan area. Participants had at least one child aged between 6 months and 8 years (M_{age} = 3.50 years, 51% male, 75% White). Richards and Calvert (2016) used the scale on a sample of 141 parents of children aged 2–6 years old (M_{age} = 49.86 months, 46.8% male, 61.75 White).

Recommendation. The scale made an important contribution to advancing measurement of children's PSEs. Inspection of the items, however, suggests operational definitions that might be conflating PSEs from basic third-party perception. As an example, consider the "personification" dimension. Thinking that a character has thoughts and emotions requires neither the sense of mutual awareness (a hallmark of PSI) nor the more enduring sense of relationship that viewers can form (a hallmark of PSR). By contrast, treating a character as a friend does suggest a PSR. Thus, we would recommend careful inspection of the items being used to make strong inferences about the concept that is actually being measured. Scholars are also reminded that the scores generated here come from parents who are rating their own perceptions of their child's behavior. Thus, the validity of this scale is suspect, given that parental estimates of children's responses to media can vary dramatically from children's own evaluations. For instance, Richards and Calvert (2016)

found in their sample that when asked to identify their child's favorite character, less than half of the parents named the same character that their child reported to the researchers directly.

Parents' Perception of PSI in Children

Scale Description. The Parents' Perception of PSI in Children (Bond & Calvert, 2014) scale was developed based on Schramm and Hartmann's (2008) PSI-Process Scales and includes six items about the child's responses to the media that parents responded to. The scale was developed and used in the same population and context as the PSR scale by the same authors. See Box 4.19 for a complete list of items.

Reliability. The PSI measure was internally consistent (α = .88), with all six items loading on a single factor explaining 63.73% of the variance.

Validity. The PSI was positively associated with PSR and with factors that are expected to facilitate PSR in children: toy engagement, repeated exposure to the media content, and parental encouragement to consume this content. PSI mediated the effect of these factors on PSR.

Recommendation. As compared to the preceding measure, this package of six items coheres much tighter conceptually. Indeed, the alpha reliability also appears to be higher. This suggests a collection of higher quality items that align with cognitive and behavioral components of PSIs, particularly EPSI. This instrument likely deserves additional testing

Box 4.19 Parents' Perception of PSI in Children

Location

Bond, B. J., & Calvert, S. L. (2014). A model and measure of US parents' perceptions of young children's parasocial relationships. *Journal of Children and Media*, *8*(3), 286–304.

Items and Instructions

Agreement with items was measured on a five-point Likert scale from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (5):

1. [Child] thinks that [character] can see him/her when [child] views [character] on a screen, like a television, computer monitor, or iPad.
2. [Child] thinks that [character] can hear him/her when [child] views the media character on a screen, like a television, computer monitor, or iPad.
3. [Child] acts like [character] is interacting with him/her when viewing the character on a screen, like a television, computer monitor, or iPad.
4. [Child] greets [character] (says "hi," waves, etc.) when [character] first appears on a screen, like a television, computer monitor, or iPad.
5. [Child] talks to [character] when [character] is portrayed on a screen.
6. When [character] asks my child to perform a certain behavior (like pointing to the screen or clapping), [child] performs the behavior.

and validation, but inspection of the items, a unidimensional factor structure, and preliminary reliability and validity checks suggest a promising tool that researchers can easily use as one way to tap PSIs in children. As above, although this tool still relies on parents' assessments of their child's behavior, the inclusion of more behavioral indicators likely reduces errors due to inferring the child's mindset.

Children's Parasocial Relationships

Scale Description. The Children's Parasocial Relationships (Richards & Calvert, 2016) scale was developed to measure children's PSRs by adapting items from Bond and Calvert's (2014) measure. The original scale was used to assess parents' perception of their children's PSRs. Richards and Calvert eliminated some of the items and modified others to make them appropriate for use with children. See Box 4.20 for a complete list of items.

Reliability. The reliability was adequate for all subscales: Social Realism: α = .89; Humanlike Needs: α = .90; Attachment and Personification; α = .75.

Box 4.20 Children's Parasocial Relationships

Location

Richards, M. N., & Calvert, S. L. (2016). Parent versus child report of young children's parasocial relationships in the United States. *Journal of Children and Media*, *10*(4), 462–480.

Items and Instructions

The interviewer read the questions to the child, who responded by pointing at a smiley that indicated varying levels of agreement. The items and their response options were as follows:

1. Is [character] . . . totally real, mostly real, kind of real, mostly pretend, or totally pretend?*
2. Is [character] . . . totally pretend, mostly pretend, kind of pretend, mostly real, or totally real?
3. How safe does [character] make you feel when you are scared? . . . really safe, safe, kind of safe, a little bit safe, or not safe at all?
4. Does [character] have . . . a whole lot of feelings, a lot of feelings, kind of has feelings, a little bit of feelings, or no feelings at all?
5. Do you believe what [character] tells you . . . all of the time, a lot of the time, sometimes, a little bit of the time, or not at all?
6. Is [character] . . . your best friend, your good friend, kind of a good friend, a little bit of a friend, or not your friend at all?
7. Does [character] get . . . really hungry, hungry, kind of hungry, a little bit hungry, or not hungry at all?
8. Does [character] get . . . really sleepy, sleepy, kind of sleepy, a little bit sleepy, or not sleepy at all?
9. How do you feel when [character] makes a mistake? . . . really sad, sad, kind of sad, a little bit sad, or not sad at all?[a]
10. Is [character] . . . really cute, kind of cute, a little bit cute, or not cute at all?

* Reverse coded.

Validity. Physical attractiveness comprised its own factor. Construct validity has been established by examining the extent to which parents' reports predicted children's reports of their PSRs, indicating that the two measures tap into the same theoretical construct.

Population and Context. The scale was developed using a sample of 194 children aged 2 to 6 years old (*M* = 51.49 months, 45.4% male). The sample was diverse, comprising 41.5% White children, 16.6% Latinx, 7.9% African American, 4.8% Asian, 11.4% other/mixed ethnicities). The questions asked children to reflect on their favorite character.

Recommendation. These items differ from the two preceding measures in that now the children are reporting for themselves. Although the scale has been used with young preschool age children, it is likely that the validity of the measure varies as a function of the individual child's cognitive and linguistic development. We also recommend that the subscales be analyzed separately, in part because the items that address humanlike needs and social realism stray from theoretical conceptions of a PSR. Of course, these are worthwhile media effects for researchers to examine within children. We simply remind researchers to use caution before taking this entire collection to reflect PSR.

PSR in Children

Scale Description. The PSR in Children (Rosaen & Dibble, 2008; Rosaen et al., 2011) scale was developed and modified over two publications. See Box 4.21 for a complete list of items.

Reliability. The scale exhibits good reliability (α = .80).

Validity. All the items loaded well on a single factor, explaining 45% of the variance.

Population. Rosaen and Dibble (2008) used a sample of 183 children (57% female, 73% White) aged 5 to 12 years old (*M* = 8.82). Rosaen et al. (2011) used a sample of 270 children that included as subset of 67 maltreated children. The nonmaltreated children were analyzed by Rosaen and Dibble (2008). The two subsamples demographics were very similar.

Context. The child's favorite character was used.

Recommendation. As with other instruments, these items borrow heavily from Rubin's PSI-Scale. Rosaen et al.'s earlier publications referred to the measured concept as PSI, although now we would recognize this to be PSR. Advantages include the scale's brevity, solid reliability, and unidimensional factor structure. As such, of the measures we reviewed that are tailored for children, this is probably one of the purer measures of PSR. The scale was developed on a sample of elementary school children. Additional research is needed to determine the age range of participants appropriate for this scale, especially since Richards and Calvert's (2016) scale supposedly can be used with much younger children. To date, however, we have not seen studies that directly compared the children's measures. Direct comparisons would be useful to promote variable reduction, cleaner comparisons across studies, and more efficient research.

Box 4.21 PSR in Children

Location

Rosaen, S. F., & Dibble, J. L. (2008). Investigating the relationships among child's age, parasocial interactions, and the social realism of favorite television characters. *Communication Research Reports*, *25*, 145–154.

Rosaen, S. F., Sherry, J. L., & Smith, S. L. (2011). Maltreatment and parasocial relationships in US children. *Journal of Children and Media*, *5*(4), 379–394.

Items and Instructions

The original version of the scale published in Rosaen and Dibble (2008) used the full Rubin's PSI-Scale with five additional child-specific items that read:

1. ______ would fit in well with my group of friends
2. If something happens to ______I feel bad
3. I would invite ______ to my birthday party
4. _______ is the kind of person I would like to play or hang out with
5. If______ lived in my neighborhood we would be friends

The final scale in Rosaen et al. (2011) totaled seven items as follows:

1. ____ makes me feel comfortable, like I'm with a friend
2. ____ seems like he/she would be easy to talk to
3. ____ seems to understand the kinds of things I want to know
4. ____ would fit in well with my group of friends
5. I would invite ____ to my birthday party
6. ____ is the kind of person I would like to play or hang out with
7. If ____ lived in my neighborhood we would be friends

Manipulation of PSR and PSI

Despite the impressive diversity of correlational research on PSEs (see Chapter 1) that continues to shape our understanding of these unique experiences, there is relatively little experimental research that directly manipulates these constructs. In their analysis of 261 empirical studies relating to parasocial phenomena published over the previous 60 years, Liebers and Schramm (2019) noted that only 16.8% of studies utilized an experimental design. Experimental manipulations allow for an enhancement in the internal validity of research results in addition to demonstrating causal relationships between variables, both of which cannot be achieved through surveys or qualitative methods alone. Thus, in this section we provide an overview of the manipulations of PSRs and PSIs in the existing literature to aid future PSE research in achieving successful manipulations.

PSI Manipulations

Unlike PSRs that require a longer time and commitment to develop (see Chapter 5), PSIs can occur in zero-history encounters between the media figure and the audience, making it easier to manipulate directly. Manipulation of PSIs is rooted in Horton and Wohl's

(1956) definition of PSI as an illusion of conversational give and take with the media personality. Accordingly, to elicit PSIs, researchers have manipulated the media figure's BTFW. This involves verbal (directly addressing viewer) and nonverbal behaviors (e.g., an illusion of eye contact by looking directly at the camera, frontal body orientation) that foster a sense of interactivity (Auter, 1992).

Several studies used these manipulations by re-editing popular television shows (e.g., *House of Cards*, Oliver et al., 2019, Study 1, and Schlütz et al., 2020; *The Biggest Loser*, Cummins & Cui, 2014). However, similar results have been obtained using written narratives (e.g., Oliver et al., 2019, Study 2), addressing the viewer individually versus in a group (e.g., Wulf et al., 2021), and public service announcements (e.g., Dibble et al., 2016; Rosaen et al., 2019; Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016; Wei et al., 2019). For instance, researchers recorded specifically for their experiment two versions of a public service message that advocated exercising before eating breakfast (Rosaen et al., 2019): a direct addressing version where the persona looked directly into the camera and oriented their body toward the viewer and an indirect addressing version that showed the persona in side view. To prevent accidental differences in the persona's performance, the persona gave only one performance, which was recorded simultaneously from two angles using separate cameras. (This is one advantage of recording new stimuli versus re-editing an existing show.)

Experimental research designs using this form of PSI manipulation have found that BTFW was successful in enhancing levels of PSI. We[2] meta-analyzed nine effect sizes from seven published papers (Auter, 1992; Beege et al., 2019; Cummins & Cui, 2014; Oliver et al., 2019; Schlütz et al., 2020; Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016; Wei et al., 2019) and uncovered that, on average, the manipulations had a significant, moderate-to-large effect (fixed effect: Cohen's $d = .624$, $SE = .049$, $p < .001$; 95% confidence interval [CI] .528 to .719). However, typically, these studies operationalize BTFW using a combination of multiple verbal and nonverbal cues, making it harder to ascertain the specific dimensions of direct address that are necessary or sufficient for eliciting PSIs.

PSR Manipulation

The overwhelming majority of studies that treat PSR as an independent variable rely on surveys rather than experiments. This is not surprising providing that a direct manipulation of a PSR requires a significant time commitment where participants gradually form this relationship with a chosen persona in a controlled environment over time (e.g., Bond, 2021). Although this is, arguably, the most conceptually valid PSR manipulation (see Chapter 5), it is logistically impractical given the unrealistic amount of resources and time required by both the researchers and participants. Moreover, although it has been theorized that repeated exposure underlies the growth of a PSR (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019), the empirical success of this approach is mixed (Tukachinsky Forster et al., in press) and it remains unclear exactly how much repeated exposure is required. In other

words, conceptually, there is no clear definition of how PSRs grow from one step to another, making it difficult to operationalize a PSR as repeated exposure.

Given these logistic and conceptual complexities, rather than directly manipulating PSR by encouraging the formation of a new relationship, researchers rely on participants' a priori PSRs. These studies randomly assign participants to watch a liked celebrity versus an unknown personality (e.g., Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016) or a celebrity they do not like (e.g., Walter et al., 2022). Although these studies attempt to control to various potential confounds, they fall short of the validity that a true experiment could offer.

One clue to how researchers might eventually generate zero-history PSRs in experimental settings might be found in social relationship research. Sedikides and colleagues (1999) published a method of inducing relationship closeness in the laboratory. Termed the relationship closeness induction task (RCIT), the procedure relies on the well-established positive relationship between depth of self-disclosure and intimacy (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Participants who are strangers at the outset engage in self-disclosure by answering 29 questions that become increasingly personal over the course of only 9 minutes. If PSRs can be conceived as intimacy at a distance, then perhaps an analog to the RCIT might be found for PSRs. Following this logic, Lotun et al. (2022) employed a parasocial fast friends paradigm (PFFP) to create PSRs with YouTube content creators. These researchers aimed to determine whether PSRs and subsequent self-disclosure about borderline personality disorder could reduce prejudice toward people living with mental health issues. To instantiate PSR, Lotun et al.'s participants viewed a video of a content creator answering a series of "get to know you" questions. Next, participants were randomly assigned to view a video disclosure segment from the same person they had just "gotten to know" (same-creator condition), a disclosure segment from a different creator (different-creator condition), or no disclosure segment (control condition). Unfortunately, the PFFP primer video failed to produce stronger PSRs than did the disclosure segments by themselves. While this runs counter to the PFFP logic, within the same-creator group, Lotun et al. observed that post-disclosure PSR scores were higher than pre-disclosure PSR scores. In other words, perhaps it wasn't the "get to know you" questions per se that mattered so much as spending additional time viewing the persona disclosing sensitive information about a mental health condition. Thus, while not entirely in line with the initial theorization, encouragingly, Lotun et al. were able to establish some semblance of PSR using an experimental paradigm. These results are promising. Researchers should continue to investigate the PFFP and similar paradigms for inducing PSRs in a lab setting. To the extent that studies could directly manipulate a PSR itself by having participants in an experimental condition develop a PSR from scratch, this would enhance the validity of PSR research.

Otherwise, it is certainly valuable to conduct longitudinal experiments. In these studies, participants are exposed to the media figure multiple times for weeks, allowing PSRs to naturally evolve over time in measurable ways. Due to the logistic complexity and high

costs, such studies are very scarce, but it is encouraging to see an increase in this line of work (Bond, 2021; Siegenthaler et al., 2021; Tukachinsky Forster et al., in press).

Conclusion

Research conclusions can never be more valid than the measures used to generate those conclusions. Thus, the path to validity always goes through measurement (Levine, 2011). These lessons apply firmly to the measurement of PSE, and, although we are encouraged by the popularity of PSE research, we caution researchers always to use care when selecting measures of their chosen PS phenomena. We have reviewed in this chapter many of the measures for PSEs. Some are immensely popular, and others have received less attention.

Employing popular measures confers advantages. For example, Rubin's enormously popular PSI-Scale permits apples-to-apples comparisons across studies that use this measure. However, despite its published name, researchers should not apply the scale to measure *PSIs*. As we have discussed and others have discussed, PSI and PSR are different concepts, and the PSI-Scale measures something more akin to PSR. Researchers can use the information in this chapter to eliminate certain items from Rubin's scale to enhance its validity. This approach, however, will decrease the apples-to-apples comparison potential of the study, undermining the appeal of using this scale in the first place. Conversely, many of the less known measures may hold promise for improved measurement of PS phenomena, but they require time and additional testing to achieve the critical mass of applications necessary for smoother cross-study comparisons. As pertains to measures of PSE, it seems both popularity and obscurity confer advantages and challenges.

It appears that there is no clear successor for Rubin's scale to measure PSRs. However, we (all authors of this chapter) agree that Tsay and Bodine's (2012) Parasocial Interaction Dimensions Scale (notwithstanding its name, that confuses PSI with PSR) holds promise. We believe that it works well as a general measure of positive PSRs that still reflects the multidimensionality now called for in the PSR concept. Additionally, the first author (Jayson) also encourages more attention to Tukachinsky's (2011) Multiple PSRs Scale that includes measures of PSF and romantic PSR. Its facets of communication, support, emotional attraction, and physical attraction are each robustly reliable and together expand content validity. Finally, we are intrigued by the potential offered by Slater et al.'s (2018) approach to measuring "chronic" PSRs and drawing a distinction between PSR with the actor and the character. This is particularly important given the fluid relationships between how individuals process the boundaries between actors/characters and the crossover effects from one to the other (Tukachinsky, 2020). We look forward to future testing of these measures.

For assessing PSI, Hartmann and Goldhoorn's (2011) EPSI Scale earns our top recommendation. However, depending on the study context and goals, researchers may find other alternatives reviewed in this chapter as tapping more relevant aspects of this

experience, such as specific subscales of the PSI-Process Scales (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). Additionally, we found it to be unfortunate that Madison and Porter's (2015, 2016) measures go largely underused. They present an opportunity to rethink PSIs as imaginary interactions, thereby adding another important body of literature to draw from and potentially illuminating exactly how PSIs manifest and maintain PSRs. Riles and Adams' (2021) measure also shows a great promise by assessing aspects of the PSI experience that have been previously overlooked.

As a final point, we are thrilled to see the proliferation and popularity of PSE research, including the variety of measures currently available. There is certainly no shortage of measures of PSEs. In fact, arguably, there are too many scales and versions of these scales, many of which are not sufficiently tested, and, of those that are, most do not fare well. Thus, we believe that PSE research would benefit from additional assessment of the validity of these measures and determining which measures are best suited for which contexts. We call on journal editors to encourage such work and urge the scholarly community to undertake this important research.

Notes

1. The remaining 8% of studies did not report sufficient information about the number of items employed.
2. We would like to thank Nathan Walter for assistance with computing the effect size.

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PART II

PS Initiation, Development, and Termination

CHAPTER

5

Initiation and Evolution of PSRs

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Abstract

Most research examines parasocial relationships (PSRs) with cross-sectional designs. However, by nature, relationships evolve over time and need to be managed and nurtured if they are to thrive. The chapter offers an account of the key predictors in the initiation and evolution of positive, amicable PSRs. This chapter addresses the dynamic nature of PSRs by providing an overview of the literature concerning factors that predict the initiation and continued growth of PSRs. The chapter then turns to describe three theoretical models that conceptualize PSRs as an ever-evolving process. The chapter concludes by highlighting several promising areas for future research into the initiation and development of PSRs.

Key Words: Panksepp-Jakobson hypothesis, attraction, homophily, binge watching, parasocial attachment, relationship maintenance, longitudinal research

Introduction to the Initiation and Evolution of (Para)social Relationships

Consider the following scenario: Looking for something to watch together on a long weekend, Sammy stumbled upon Morgan Spurlock's documentary series *Inside Man*. Sammy watched Spurlock go places and do things. She listened to his thoughts; learned about his beliefs; and laughed at his humorous comments. Spurlock looked straight in Sammy's eyes, not only sharing interesting facts but also divulging personal stories about his family and life. Over the next few weeks, Morgan (at this point, Sammy was on a first-name basis with him) became a routine guest in Sammy's living room. She felt like she knew him so well she could predict his reactions in different situations—when he will crack a joke or go silent. She enjoyed his company and his soothing voice and looked forward to their evenings together. She was curious about his personal life and enjoyed learning about his ex-wife, his son, and current girlfriend. She even found herself thinking about him occasionally during the weekdays ("What would have Morgan say about THIS?"). When Sammy ran out of *Inside Man* episodes, she missed Morgan and looked for more of his work, trying to stay in touch by watching *Supersize Me* and other films he appeared in. But without getting together on a regular basis and without keeping tabs

on his life, their "friendship" started to crumble. Then, in the wake of the #MeToo social movement, Spurlock came forward about his own wrongdoings against female coworkers and relational partners, as well as his substance abuse issues. All of his ongoing projects were cancelled, and he pledged to pursue treatment and rehabilitation. This was a major disappointment for Sammy. The friend she trusted and felt like she knew well turned out to be a completely different person. She was confused and disenchanted. Should she pity him for his own problems and appreciate that he came forward and took responsibility for his actions? Or should she "cancel" him in full support of the survivors of his abuse? Either way, seeing Spurlock (he was no longer "Morgan" for her) would never be the same. The friendship she built was broken entirely.

To a large degree, this example encapsulates the many parallels between social and parasocial relationships (PSRs) in terms of how they are initiated, maintained, and even dissolved (Cohen, 2003; Giles, 2002; Wong et al., 2017; also see Chapter 2 in this volume). As this chapter illustrates, the parasocial connection between Sammy and Morgan Spurlock, including its various stages and behavioral manifestations, is quite common among audience members, and it highlights the many interesting and often surprising parallels between the social and the parasocial with regard to the initiation and evolution of PSRs.

This chapter first offers an account of the key predictors in the initiation and evolution of positive, amicable PSRs (see Chapter 17 in this volume for a discussion of nonamicable PSRs and Chapter 6 for relational challenges and dissolution). The chapter follows by presenting theoretical models that center on PSRs as dynamic processes and concludes by proposing several promising directions for future research.

Key Predictors in the Initiation and Evolution of PSRs

Broadly speaking, the literature points to two ways to think about the initiation of PSRs—a process that mimics social relationships (Panksepp-Jakobson hypothesis, PJH) and a process that is based on mediated interactions (parasocial interactions approach). Importantly, these approaches are not mutually exclusive as they are best understood as complementary ways to think about connections with mediated personae.

The Panksepp-Jakobson Hypothesis

The overarching frameworks that explain the close association between the social and the parasocial is the Panksepp-Jakobson hypothesis (Jacobs et al., 2015). Based in neuroscience, this approach argues that the same neural circuits that are used to process social relationships are also recruited when processing one-sided relationships with media personae. It is not that individuals are unable to distinguish between reciprocated relationships and parasocial involvement with mediated figures but rather that the evolution of the human brain is somewhat lagging behind technological advancements, such that we are left to navigate a relatively new media landscape using an ancient vessel that is the human brain

(Reeves & Nass, 1996). Following the logic of the PJH, one can make the prediction that the same social mechanisms that are responsible for the initiation of social relationships will also be responsible for the initiation of parasocial ones. Several such mechanisms are discussed in this section.

Shared Time. As with the initiation and evolution of social relationships, the most obvious predictor of PSRs is simply spending time together with the media persona. According to Hall (2019), it takes roughly 30 hours of contact, spread across several weeks, to form a casual friendship and about 140 hours of shared time if the relationship were to involve into a close friendship (p. 1287). Similarly, repeated exposure to media personae has been identified as a potential predictor for the initiation of PSRs. For instance, interviews about parasocial romantic relationships (PSRRs), revealed that "all the interviewees stated that they watched and rewatched the films and TV shows starring their favorite actor or character, or listened excessively to the music artist's songs" (Tukachinsky Forster, 2021, p. 37). The importance of spending time together was also supported in a recent meta-analysis that found a positive correlation between amount of exposure to the media personae and the intensity of PSR (Tukachinsky et al., 2020).

Amount of exposure. One possible explanation for the influence of repeated exposure is grounded in the propinquity (also known as proximity) effect literature, suggesting that the people who, often by chance, we see and interact with the most are the ones that end up becoming our closest friends, companions, and lovers. Indeed, there is a long line of research suggesting that physical proximity and repeated exposure to the same people breeds familiarity, liking, and feelings of safety (e.g., Festinger et al., 1950). This striking finding is often explained as a special case of the mere exposure effect, whereby the more we are exposed to the same stimuli, the more we like it (Zajonc, 1968). After all, we tend to associate positive feelings and thoughts with things that are familiar, such as movies we watched as children, comfort food, or even vacation spots our family would visit on a regular basis.

In parallel to relationships that blossom due to physical proximity, PSRs can begin due to propinquity to particular characters. For example, consider watching the same show for a number of seasons; during this time, audience members have experienced the highs and lows of the protagonist's journey and have watched (and perhaps rewatched) numerous interactions between her and other characters. At some point, audience members gain insight into the inner world of the mediated character and they can even anticipate how she would react in a variety of scenarios (Giles, 2002). As with social relationships, this shared experience and repeated exposure beget familiarity, liking, and a sense of intimacy that slowly develop into a meaningful relationship (Mar & Oatley, 2008).

Moreover, interpersonal theories suggest that commitment to social relationships are a function of not only satisfaction in the relationship but also the amount of investment that the individual puts in that relationship (Rusbult et al., 1986). Time is one important resource that individuals can invest in relationships, especially in a parasocial context. Repeated exposure can require rearranging one's routine for appointment television

watching (i.e., watching the show when it is broadcasted) or adjusting one's schedule to allocate time for binge watching. It also involves sacrifices as, inevitably, spending time with the character displaces other activities—an investment that accumulates with repeated exposure.

Although it stands to reason that repeated exposure enhances PSRs over time, this assumption is based mainly in logic and correlational evidence. As a result, one cannot fully eliminate the reverse relationship between PSR intensity and repeated exposure. After all, part of being in a satisfying relationship entails wanting to spend even more time with the relational partner, or in the immortal words of Winne-the-Pooh, A. A. Milne's literary character: "A day without a friend is like a pot without a single drop of honey left inside" (Plath et al., 2019, p. 247). And so, the stronger one's sense of friendship with the media figure, the more time they will spend consuming media featuring that media persona.

Recently, however, Bond (2022a) provided compelling empirical evidence to support the assertion that repeated exposure plays a central and causal role in the development and evolution of PSRs. In a longitudinal experiment, Bond (2022a) examined whether repeated exposure to outgroup (gay) characters on the Showtime serial drama *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005) can reduce heterosexual viewers' prejudice toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals. Every Monday for a period of 10 weeks, participants watched one episode of the show and completed a questionnaire that assessed, among other variables, the level of PSR with eight key characters on the show. While the findings of this study were interesting on several levels, for the purpose of this chapter, we focus on the evolution of PSR once contact with the outgroup characters has been initiated. As the PJH would have predicted, the level of PSR with outgroup characters has grown over time and with repeated exposure to the show. What is most striking about the evolution of these mediated relationships is that, at the conclusion of the 10-week period, participants developed strong, meaningful PSRs with at least one gay character on the show.

However, a different pattern of results has emerged in another two recent longitudinal studies. Siegenthaler et al. (2021) examined whether a 5-week exposure to *The Biggest Loser*, an American reality show that features overweight contestants who compete for cash prizes by losing weight, increases the level of PSR with the TV characters. Siegenthaler et al.'s findings, however, were not as promising as the ones obtained by Bond (2022a). This time, PSR with *The Biggest Loser*'s contestants did not increase over time and after repeated exposure. Similarly, Tukachinsky Forster et al. (in press) conducted a longitudinal experiment specifically designed to examine the evolution of zero-history relationships with a media personality. Participants in the study watched a 10-minute YouTube vlog every day for four consecutive days. Contrary to the hypothesis, the level of viewers' PSR with the vlogger did not significantly increase over time.

The surprising lack of association between PSR and repeated exposure can, perhaps, be attributed to lack of measurement sensitivity. Tukachinsky and Stever (2019) suggested

that relational stages are qualitatively different from others. While overall positive disposition toward the characters can remain stable over time, each stage of the PSR is associated with specific relational markers, such as uncertainty reduction or a shift from physical and task attraction to social attraction. Thus, it is conceivable that using the same low-sensitivity measure at each point of time misses the qualitative evolution of the PSR. Rather than looking for change in intensity on the same dimension, a measure capturing the unique aspects of each stage could, perhaps, perform better at documenting how the PSR did change over time. Thus, this is not only a methodological concern but also a conceptual question that can stimulate additional research refining the theory and identifying the boundary conditions that may mask the overall effect of exposure on PSR.

It could be, however, that the discrepancy between the results of these studies stems from methodological differences that represent deeper conceptual, theoretical reasons. As mentioned earlier, Bond's (2022a) study found the longitudinal effects in the context of fictional character embedded in a narrative, whereas Siegenthaler et al.'s (2021) and Tukachinsky Forster et al.'s (in press) studies failed to document longitudinal changes in PSRs with "real" people in non-fictional content (reality TV and vlogs, respectively). Moreover, Bond's study tracked viewers over 10 weeks, while Siegenthaler did so for 5 weeks, and Tukachinsky Forster et al. for less than 1 week. Consequently, Tukachinsky Forster et al. (in press) postulate, it could be that the nature of the media personality, the type of content type, and the amount and length of exposure could play a role in how PSRs evolve over time. It could be, for instance, that PSRs with fictional characters develop gradually over time, as the narrative arch unfolds, whereas PSRs with "real" media personalities (in encounters that do not follow a distinctive narrative arch) are defined on the first impression of the media personality that remains more stable over time or takes longer to evolve. These mixed results point at the complex relationship between repeated exposure and PSR development, that is more nuanced than may have been previously recognized.

It is also important to note that in many experimental longitudinal studies such as Bond's (2022a) and Tukachinsky et al. (in press), participants are incentivized to remain in the study until the last wave of data collection. This has the potential to create non-naturalistic media experience, as audience members continue watching media content they would otherwise have stopped watching. Tukachinsky et al. (in press) reflected on their study results, postulating that viewers who generally liked the media personality may have experienced a growth in PSR intensity, but this effect was obscured by the low PSR of viewers who disliked the media figure. This explanation suggests that repeated exposure facilitates PSRs but it does not improve negative PSRs.

Binge Watching. Another aspect of shared time, beyond the amount of time spent consuming the media content relates to the pace of media consumption. Specifically, it is possible that binge watching (defined as consuming three or more episodes of a TV show in one sitting) impacts how the same amount of time with the characters is experienced

by viewers. The direction of the effect, however, is less clear. Two competing hypotheses can be proposed. On the one hand, binge watching creates an intense experience wherein viewers concentrate on the character for an uninterrupted, prolonged period of time. This condensed viewing mode should, theoretically, facilitate stronger PSRs. On the other hand, watching the shows in a traditional, spaced out manner, stretches the PSRs to develop over a longer period of time. Instead of a single intense dose of shared time, viewers enjoy shorter "meetings" with the characters, but the overall relationship runs for a longer period time. The time between the viewing sessions, could, theoretically, also contribute to the relationship's growth, as media users continue to think about the characters offline (Slater et al., 2018). This mental activity maintains the PSR and can be as (if not more) important to the PSR development as the time spent watching the media content itself (Tukachinsky Forster, 2021).

Although both hypotheses appear to be compelling, empirical research found weak, yet consistent support for the first hypothesis. Tukachinsky and Eyal (2018) found that viewers of dramas and comedies report higher level of PSRs if they binge watched the content rather than watched it in a traditional manner. However, due to the correlational nature of the study, the results are open to interpretation as reverse causation (i.e., it could be that viewers who formed stronger PSRs had difficulty to self-regulate and stop watching the show after the first episode ended). Erickson et al. (2019) provide a stronger test of the hypothesis in an experimental study in which participants watched three episodes of a TV series that was new to them. They were randomly assigned to watch the same episodes either in one sitting or across multiple days. Those who binge watched the show reported a slightly stronger level of PSRs compared to those who watched the same episodes on different days. Together, these findings suggest that not only the sheer amount of shared time but also the spacing of this time matters for PSR development. It appears that binge watching accelerates the progression of the bonding between audiences and media personalities, from zero-history relationship to friendship. Moreover, this intense experience appears to be more important to PSR growth than retroactive media engagement (i.e., fantasizing about the media figure in between viewing sessions).

Perceived Similarity. Another way in which the initiation of PSRs may mimic social relationships has to do with homophily. The term *homophily* is used to describe "a tendency for friendships to form between those who are alike in some designated respect" (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954, p. 23). In an interpersonal context, homophily, between two people, is often related to attraction and to more effective communication patterns (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970). While the propinquity effect assumes that attraction occurs due to physical circumstances that allow for greater exposure, homophily in the context of PSRs suggests that it is easier to establish feelings of closeness and intimacy with others who are perceived to be similar to us in a significant way (Perse & Rubin, 1989; Turner, 1993). In support of homophily as a predictor of PSRs, Bond (2022b) found that PSR with media personae during the COVID-19 pandemic were common, particularly when

the audience and the media personae were of the same gender, race, or age. This seems to reinforce the assumption that just like birds of the feather flock together in social relationships, they seem to flock together in mediated ones as well.

The key role played by homophily as a lubricant of social and parasocial ties can be easily explained from the perspective of the uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). According to this approach, people utilize active, interactive, and passive strategies to reduce uncertainty in their relationship with others (Dias et al., 2017). These strategies are employed especially in the earliest stages of a relationship, when we try to learn about the other person in order to reduce the level of uncertainty and increase our trust (Eyal & Dailey, 2012). As such, uncertainty reduction on leads to interpersonal attraction and greater perceived intimacy in a shorter period of time (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; A. M. Rubin et al., 1985). Accordingly, with greater perceived homophily, there should be less uncertainty, potentially making PSRs smoother and more enjoyable from the get-go (Fehr, 2008). This may be particularly true for individuals from marginalized social groups, such as members of ethnic/racial or sexual minorities, who often seek out ingroup characters for the purpose of self-affirmation (see review of the literature on PSRs in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, asexual [LGBTQA] media users in Chapter 13 and the importance of PSR opportunities with characters sharing one's ethnic/racial identity in Chapter 18).BS

If perceived similarity across various domains, including background characteristics, values, and beliefs, consistently predicts friendship initiation and interpersonal attraction, it is unsurprising that research uncovers a strong and consistent correlation between perceived homophily and the intensity of PSRs (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). Again, as the PJH would predict, the social and parasocial seem to be closer than one might initially suspect.

Attraction. Beyond repeated exposure and homophily, relationships are often initiated due to attraction (R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Defined as liking or a positive perception of warm feeling toward the other (McCroskey & McCain, 1974), attraction plays a fundamental role in the initiation and development of PSRs (Brown, 2015; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). Indeed, parasocial involvement is closely related to attraction, which is among the most important element in relationships (Berscheid & Walster, 1978). From research into involvement with TV hosts (Boon & Lomore, 2001) to shopping channel personae (Grant et al., 1991), and the affinity of adolescents toward celebrities (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007), feeling attracted to a media persona intensifies the viewer's sense of importance in the relationship (Lim & Kim, 2011).

When thinking about attraction as a factor that brings people together, there are several components worthy of consideration. Three of these are physical attraction (having to do with the other person's appearance); social attractiveness (having to do with how well the other person fits into their various social groups); and task attractiveness (having to do with the perceived competence and success of the other person). Interestingly, when

directly comparing the importance of different types of attractiveness, R. B. Rubin and McHugh (1987) concluded that social attraction is a more important motivating factor in developing PSRs than physical attraction.

Although the vast majority of empirical attention has focused on physical and social aspects of attractions, there is some reason to suspect that task attraction can be an important predictor as well, especially when audiences are less likely to be physically or socially attracted to the media personae due to lack of awareness or entrenched stigma. For instance, Stever (2009) found that the vast majority (84% of male and 91% of female) respondents expressed task attraction to their favorite celebrity, citing the celebrity's talent and capabilities as an important factor in their attraction toward this media figure. Moreover, Stever estimated that some 10% of the fans developed attachment to the media figure as a coworker. For these individuals, task attraction was what predominantly guided their parasocial engagement, as they expressed a desire to be the celebrity's collaborator or coworker on a shared creative project.

Notably, summarizing the empirical research on the relationship between attraction and PSRs, Tukachinsky et al. (2020) found both physical and social attraction to the media personae to be strong predictors of the intensity of PSRs. However, it is possible that different types of PSRs are driven by different types of attraction. For example, it is not surprising that when teens and adults were asked why they developed a romantic PSR with a media personality, individuals were substantially more likely to cite physical attributes of their parasocial crush than personality characteristics or the media figure's work-related capabilities (Tukachinsky Forster, 2021).

Overall, the findings around repeated exposure, homophily, and attractiveness suggest that users evaluate media personae along similar criteria to people they encounter in the flesh (Giles, 2002). Thus, the PJH is gaining both theoretical and empirical momentum as more and more evidence emerges showing the similarities between social and parasocial attachment.

The Parasocial Interaction Approach

A complementary approach to PSR initiation considers how relationships grow as a function of interactions between the relational partners. Rather than merely considering the amount of time spent together, this approach considers the quality of interactions that filled that shared time, as well as the specific activities or behaviors that promote intimacy and foster bonding.

To start, research on interpersonal relationships identifies self-disclosure as an important building block in eliciting liking and forming friendship (for a meta-analysis and review, see Collins & Miller, 1994; Derlega et al., 2008). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that the amount of personal information divulged by the media figure would intensify PSRs. Indeed, several studies found that celebrities' self-disclosure on social media can intensify their fans' PSRs (Chung & Cho, 2017; Kim & Song, 2016).

It is also possible to consider the simulation of an interaction between the media figure and the media user more broadly. This reasoning can be traced back to the earliest work on parasocial phenomena and specifically the observation that media personae initiate the feeling of parasocial connection by simulating the conventions of interpersonal communication (Horton & Wohl, 1956). When this simulated conversational give and take is successful, audiences respond to these appeals as though they were personal connections (Horton & Strauss, 1957).

According to this view, engaging in parasocial interactions (PSIs) can ultimately foster PSRs (although this would not be a necessary or a sufficient condition). For example, Schramm and Knoll (2015) have outlined three key features of media personae that initiate and foster PSIs: obtrusiveness, duration of exposure, and attractiveness. Since we have already considered duration and attractiveness, it is important to focus on the dimension of obtrusiveness. According to this view, people are likely to interact with media personalities who are more obtrusive; that is, for example, the greater the space on the television screen occupied by a media character. Another major factor contributing to PSI is addressing the audience directly; for instance, "breaking the fourth wall," creates the illusion of social interaction and invites audience members to play a part in the symbolic environment (Auter, 1992). Performative cues such as eye gaze and bodily or verbal address can go a long way in inviting the audience to take an active role in the conversational give and take with the media personae (Cohen et al., 2019; Dibble et al., 2016; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). In line with this reasoning, Tukachinsky et al.'s (2020) meta-analysis revealed that PSIs and PSRs are positively correlated ($r = .45$), alluding to the possibility that PSIs facilitate a more meaningful relationship.

The PSR, however, does not only exist during media consumption, while the audiences are directly engaging with the mediated personae. Rather, as with social relationships, PSRs exist outside the specific instances of media use. One possible way to address this limitation is to think of interactions with media figures beyond PSIs, which are constrained to the time of media use, and start thinking more broadly about imagined interactions (IIs). IIs are defined as an "individual's internal dialogue with others when the individual is not engaged in actual interaction with the others" (Hu et al., 2021, p. 7). IIs have been shown to be not only quite common (in a recent study, 60% of research participants reported on IIs with a media personae), but also associated with stronger PSRs, explaining up to 40% in the intensity of involvement with media personae (Hu et al., 2021). Some of the most obvious examples of IIs come from the world of sports fandom and fantasy leagues (Keaton et al., 2014), wherein fans imagine a variety of scenarios for their favorite players, coaches, or teams, but they are certainly not limited to fandoms or fantasy leagues. Beyond the fact that IIs occur outside of the instances of media consumption, they also seem to have a more active component compared to PSIs, requiring audience members to engage in an internal dialogue with the media personae and develop scripts for various actions the mediated character may choose in the future

(Honeycutt, 2003; Madison & Porter, 2015). As such, PSIs and IIs can complement each other, accounting for interactions both during and in-between exposures to the media personae.

Theoretical Models Accounting for the Initiation and Evolution of PSRs

Although a review of distinct predictors can shed light on the antecedents of mediated relationships, the ultimate goal of research is to propose and test theoretical models that offer a more holistic view of the development of PSRs, involving a variety of interdependent factors on the side of both the audience and the personae. Such models are trying to visualize, explain, or predict a complicated reality by focusing on its most essential components, those that can best account for the development and management of PSRs. At present, there is only a handful of theoretical models that specifically focus on the questions of how PSRs are initiated, grow, or dissolve over time. The three models we focus on in this chapter—the PSI processes during media consumption model, the PSR stages model, and the model of parasocial ego involvement—address the initiation and evolution of PSRs from different perspectives, offering their unique take on the dynamic nature of parasocial phenomena.

Model of Interpersonal Involvement With Media Personas

Adapted from earlier work (Hartmann et al., 2004), Klimmt et al. (2006) proposed the model of PSI processes during media consumption that illustrates what happens when viewers and media personae meet. Do not let the visual simplicity of the model fool you since the model is cleverly constructed to hold a lot of useful information (see Figure 5.1). To start, the model represents relational dynamics that occur over time with horizontal arrows, suggesting that the audience can evolve in terms of their motivation and knowledge, while the media personae are also subject to change in terms of their appearance, behavior, and noticeability.

To illustrate how the evolution of mediated characters can influence the initiation of PSRs, consider Eleanor Shellstrop, the principal character in *The Good Place* (2016–2020), an NBC fantasy comedy, who starts the show as a selfish person concerned exclusively with her self-preservation. Gradually, however, Eleanor transitions to be more selfless and thoughtful, eventually deciding to sacrifice her own future to save her friends. According to the temporal axis in the model, this type of transition in the character's behavior may have a positive influence on its reception, increasing the likelihood of PSRs with that character. A transition in the opposite direction can be exhibited in the show *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–2019), a Netflix drama. In the first few seasons of the show, the narrative is told from the perspective of Piper Chapman, the main protagonist whose character was based on the lived experience of the author of *Orange Is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison* (Kerman, 2010; NPR, 2013). As the show progresses, the story gradually shifts away from Piper's perspective to focus on other protagonists, eventually rendering her a peripheral

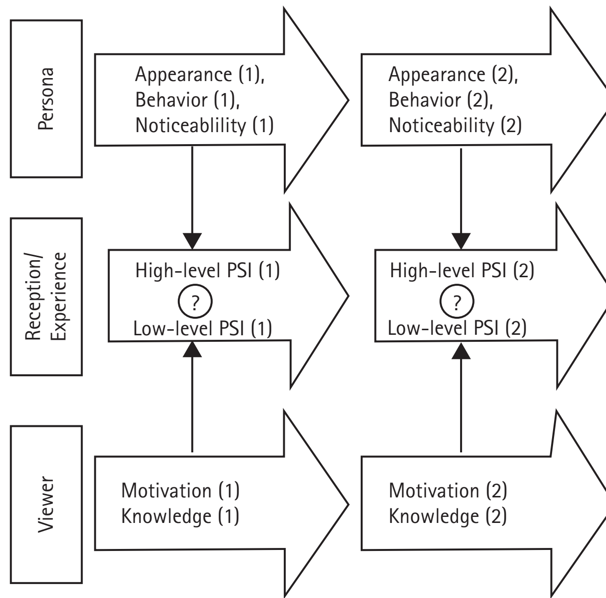

Figure 5.1 Model of interpersonal involvement with media personae from Klimmt et al. (2006). Horizontal arrows indicate procedural dynamics over time (e.g., changes in a persona's appearance or behavior); vertical arrows indicate causal influences (e.g., the noticeability of a persona at Time 1 influences the quality and intensity of PSI at Time 1). Numbers in parentheses indicate time dependence of variable (e.g., viewers' motivation for PSI may be different at Time 1 and Time 2). J. Bryant & P. Vorderer (Eds.), *Psychology of entertainment*. Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006. Reprinted with permission from: Taylor & Francis Group LLC.

character (Ward, 2017). According to the model, this change in the character's noticeability can reduce the level of PSR, or even dissolve existing relationships altogether.

Shifting the focus to audience characteristics that affect PSR dynamics, the model suggests that motivation and knowledge can determine if, how, and when individuals become involved with media personae. For instance, some viewers may be motivated to follow more attractive characters, but this motivation can change over time, as they get to know the inner world of the personae. Relatedly, as the knowledge regarding the media personae grows, the level of affinity and intimacy may follow suit. One can think of numerous violent video games, such as *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar North) or *The Walking Dead* series (Telltale Games), where a character that is portrayed as a "bad guy" or a bully uses violence to solve problems. Although such behavior can be initially off-putting; gradually, the violence becomes more palatable as players get to know the circumstances behind the aggressive behavior (Walter & Tsfati, 2018). In this manner, temporal changes in knowledge about the characters or the level of motivation to engage with them can cultivate stronger PSRs.

Beyond the focus on audience- and personae-related factors that may influence mediated relationships, the direction of the arrows in the model clearly illustrates that both the audience member and media personae have a say in the evolution of their relationships.

In other words, this model demonstrates that both audience members and media personae influence not only the quantity and quality of PSRs, but also how the next chapter in the relationships will unfold.

Relational Stages Model of PSRs

If the model of PSI processes during media consumption acknowledges the importance of temporal changes in relationships by including two theoretical time points, Tukachinsky and Stever's (2019) model of PSR stages provides a much more detailed outline of how PSRs transition from stage to stage, from initiation (Stage 1) and experimentation (Stage 2), to intensification (Stage 3) and integration (Stage 4). Echoing Knapp's model (Knapp, 1978; Knapp et al., 2014) of nonmediated social relationships, each relational stage is associated with its own unique goal. For instance, initiation of relationships, the earliest stage, is associated with impression formation and dispositions, whereas later in the experimentation stage, the main goals are to reduce uncertainty, forecast relational outcomes, and learn more about the media personae. As PSRs transition to the intensification stage, the main goals are no longer to get to know the personae, but rather to find intimacy or form a more personal connection. During the final stage, the integration, the audience may seek physical contact with the media personae and incorporate their perceived understanding of the character into the audiences' own identity and self-perception. According to this theorization, some PSRs can be superficial, like an acquaintance whereas other PSRs may grow deeper, to the point of the media user developing a parasocial attachment (PSA)—a special, meaningful connection that offers media users comfort and a sense of safe haven (Stever, 2011).

Each stage is theorized to be marked by specific cognitive, affective, and behavioral manifestations. For example, from a cognitive perspective during the initiation stage, audience members are likely to have high levels of uncertainty and be curious about the personae. Yet, after initial uncertainty is reduced throughout the experimentation stage, the intensification stage is associated with a greater sense of familiarity, to the point where audience members think about the character and are even able to have an internal dialogue with them, which is reminiscent of IIs. On an affective level, physical attraction that happens during the initiation stage morphs into social attraction in the experimentation stage, wherein audience members want to socialize more with the personae because of how they make them feel. Further, stronger emotions toward the personae during the intensification stage translate into feelings of devotion and intimacy during the integration stage. Along with cognitive and affective reactions, the different stages of PSRs also have unique behavioral manifestations. For instance, intention to seek more exposure to the character in the initiation stage may encourage the audience to follow the media personae across various platforms in the experimentation stage. Rewatching content and conversing with others about the media personae are indicative of behaviors in the intensification stage, whereas collecting memorabilia or creating fan fiction is more likely to

happen during the integration stage. To assist researchers in operationalizing the dynamic nature of PSRs, Tukachinsky and Stever (2019) also included sample items for each stage, adapted from previous studies (see Table 5.1). Importantly, items from a single existing measure can represent different stages of the PSR.

Going beyond the cognitive, affective, and behavioral manifestations associated with each stage in this framework, the PSR stages model also describes different predictors and outcomes for each stage. In line with the comprehensiveness of this framework, there are predictors pertaining to the media personae, the audience member/viewer, and the interaction between both entities. In the initiation stage, characteristics of the media personae (e.g., attractiveness, morality of actions), factors relating to the audience (e.g., attraction to the personae, prior exposure), and PSI cues (e.g., breaking the fourth wall, size of screen) all act as predictors of specific outcomes, such as increase in attention and retention of information, as well as counterarguing and social comparison.

As with the initiation stage, the experimentation stage includes predictors related to the personae, audience, and their interaction. Namely, the similarity and accessibility of the personae, and the audience member's attraction and playfulness, as well as the amount and valence of PSIs act jointly to predict an increase in exposure, enjoyment, and feeling of suspense. For the remaining two stages in this framework (intensification and integration), the model does not specify predictors at the level of the personae. This is presumably because the personae have already contributed everything they can to foster PSRs, and now it is up to the audience to decide the fate of this relationship. Thus, in the intensification stage, viewer attachment styles and interaction factors (e.g., perceived reciprocity, violation of viewer's expectations of the personae, and personae's level of self-disclosure) predict persuasion, feelings of self-efficacy, thinking about the personae when not being exposed to the personae, and so on. Finally, in the integration stage, audience members' personality, identity needs, and compensation needs, coupled with the interaction factors of satisfaction from prior relationships, as well as the frequency and quality of interactions, predict audience members' self-concept, decision to self-alter, and mood.

PSRs Ego Involvement Model

Unlike the previous two models that attempt to explain the initiation and evolution of PSRs broadly, other models have focused more exclusively on the development of mediated relationships among specific populations. One noteworthy example is Riles and Adams's (2021) model of PSRs ego involvement. According to this model (see Figure 5.2), egocentric individuals, those who are more likely to engage in social comparison, have a somewhat different way of developing and maintaining PSRs. After all, if one tends to compare themselves to others, media personae offer ample opportunities to engage in aspirational comparisons (comparing oneself to someone who is superior or better). According to this logic, egocentric individuals develop relationships with media personae primarily through social comparison that gradually develops into wishful identification and finally PSRs. Put

Table 5.1 Stages of PSR Development

		Initiation	Experimentation	Intensification	Integration
Goal		Impression formation and disposition	Uncertainty reduction, forecasting relational outcomes, learning more to ensure consistency/reach certainty	Seeking intimacy, forming a personal relationship	Integration with self-identity and seeking physical contact if applicable
Manifestation	Cognitive	• Attention • Curiosity • Social comparison • Critical evaluation • High uncertainty	• Greater knowledge • Lower uncertainty	• Sense of knowing the figure well • Thinking about the figure while not watching • Having internal dialogue with the character	• Less critical in the event of a scandal/transgression • Defining oneself as the figure's fan • Being thought of by others as the figure's fan
	Affective	• Physical and task attraction but not others	• Social attraction • Positive (or negative) feelings • Liking and sympathy (or dislike, in negative PSR)	• Feeling like a friend/mother/romantic • Empathy and strong emotional reactions • Sense of companionship	• Feeling of intimacy • Feeling devotion • Being soothed by the character • Negative feelings toward the figure's antifans
	Behavioral	• Intention to seek more exposure to the figure • Intention to seek more information about the figure and/or media text	• Exposure to the figure in other media productions • Exposure to information about the figure and/or media production in other media	• Rewatching content • Seeking additional media featuring the figure • Following on social media • Discussing the figure with others	• Spend much time on activities and thoughts related to the figure • Joining fan clubs • Acquiring memorabilia • Creating fan fiction • Seeking actual contact with figure • Changing self because of figure

Sample items adapted from existing measures	• I had only little exposure to this persona (WR) • He/she seems attractive to me although I don't know him/her (WR) • So far, I don't know much about him/her but X looks like someone I might want to get to know (WR) • I don't have a strong emotional reaction to what happens to X (SH, without reverse coding) • I wondered if X is similar to me or not (SH)	• I enjoy trying to predict what X would do (AP) • I am becoming aware of aspects of X that I really liked or disliked (SH) • I am curious to learn about details of X's life (MLH) • I consume media featuring X because I want to learn how things would evolve around X (SH) • I would like to have a casual conversation with X (WR) • I am trying to read more about X or watch X on different programs in order to get a better understanding of who X is (AP) • I use the internet to look up information about X to get a better idea of who he/she is (BB)	• X made me feel comfortable, as if I was with a friend (R) • I think of X as of an old friend (R) • I feel like I understand the emotions X experiences (BB) • I have strong emotional responses to what happens to X (SH) • I care about what happens to X (AP) • I feel very knowledgeable and aware of the details of X's life (WC) • I know all about him—his history, his biographical information, his personality, etc. (EK) • I am very aware of the details of X's life (BB) • X keeps me company while I consume the media (R) • I could have disclosed positive/negative things about myself to X honestly and deeply (T) • Sometimes I wish I could ask X for advice (T) • I sometimes find myself thinking about X even while not using media (BB)	• I share with X a special bond that cannot be described in words (MD) • I am more devoted to X than anyone else I know (EK) • I spend a lot of my time on activities related to X (WR) • People in my social life think of me as X's fan (WR) • It seems like I think about X all of the time (EK) • I turn to X in times of need for comfort (T) • X provides me with an opportunity to express myself and my uniqueness (CC) • X provides me with an opportunity to grow and discover more aspects of myself (CC) • I support those who support X (WC)/It would be difficult for me to be friends with someone who has a negative opinion of X (original item) • If someone gave me several thousand dollars to do with as I please, I would consider spending it on a personal possession once used by X (MLH) • I have pictures and/or souvenirs of X which I always keep in exactly the same place (MLH) • If X was accused of committing a crime that accusation would have to be false (MD)

(*continued*)

Table 5.1 Continued

		Initiation	Experimentation	Intensification	Integration
Predictors	Media figure	Attractiveness Morality of actions Superficial similarity Popularity	Similarity on deeper levels Accessibility		
	Viewer	Attraction (physical) Past exposure Needs/motivation	Attraction (social/task) Playfulness	Attachment style	Personality type Compensation needs Identity needs and autonomy
	Interaction	PSI cues (screen size, 4th wall)	Amount and valance of PSI	Expectancy violation Perceived reciprocity Figure's self-disclosure	Satisfaction from prior relationship stages Frequency and quality of interaction
Outcomes		↑Attention ↑Retention ↑Counteraguing ↑Social comparison	↑Exposure ↑Enjoyment, TV affinity ↑Suspense	↑Interpretation ↑Modeling and persuasion ↑Parasocial contact effect ↑Self-efficacy Counteraguing/reactance ↑Thinking of the media figure outside the media exposure	↑Self-concept and mood ↑Self-alteration

Note. Sample items adapted from **AP** = Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; **BB =** Bocarnea & Brown, 2007; **CC** = Chung & Cho, 2017; **EK** = Engle & Kasser, 2005; **MD** = Maltby et al., 2006; **MLH** = McCutcheon et al., 2003 **R** = A. M. Rubin et al., 1985; **SH** = Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; **T** = Tukachinsky, 2011; **WC** = Wen & Cui, 2014; **WR** = Welch & Rubin, 2002. Tukachinsky, R., & Stever, G. (2019). Theorizing development of parasocial engagement. *Communication Theory*, *29*(3), 297–318.

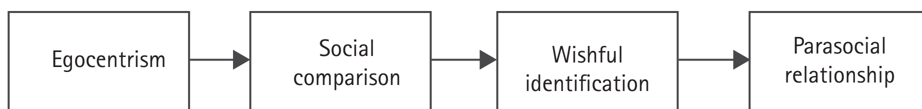

Figure 5.2 The model of parasocial ego involvement. A simplified and recreated model from Riles and Adams (2021).

differently, egocentric tendencies lead people to actively seek role models for comparison in the media (social comparison), and when such role models are found (wishful identification), they become their parasocial friends (positive PSR). This model was recently supported in a study with college students. Using the prompt, "Take a moment and think of a media figure that you really enjoy and have encountered—via media or otherwise—in the last month" (Riles & Adams, 2021, p. 802), the authors showed that students who scored high on the egocentrism scale were more likely to engage in social comparisons with their favorite media figure. In turn, these comparisons led to a desire to be like the media figure, ultimately translating into PSRs.

All in all, although this sequential model offers a unique take on mediated relationships, the focus on social comparison as a route to friendship is both its greatest advantage and limitation. Namely, while aspirational comparisons are certainly one way to befriend others, it arguably represents only a small slice of the PSR mosaic—to the same extent that our social circles include people that we wish to be like, as well as people we are close to for a multitude of other reasons.

The Way Forward: Promising Avenues and Challenges to Overcome

A growing body of evidence found notable parallels between parasocial and social relationships in both initiation (e.g., individuals are drawn to physically and socially attractive media figures; Brown, 2015) and dissolution stages (e.g., individuals grieve following the death of a beloved media figure; Daniel & Westerman, 2017; DeGroot & Leith, 2018; see Chapter 6 in this volume on PSR challenges and dissolution). However, relatively less is known about what happens between these points. In particular, two important questions call for further research attention.

First, what are the specific behaviors that media users engage in to maintain their ongoing relationships? To maintain social ties, to the extent that the relationship is close, individuals engage in behaviors such as visiting each other's houses, going together to other places, exchanging (increasingly) personal information, and offering each other words of encouragement and validation (e.g., Oswald et al., 2004). However, very few PSR studies employ measures that truly tap into the "work" that individuals put into maintaining and nurturing their relationships with media figures. Most studies assess PSRs as media users' overall perceptions of and feelings toward the media figure using scales that provide little insight into exactly how media users sustain their PSR on a regular basis. We encourage researchers to utilize some of the existing scales that do tap into these ongoing aspects of the PSR maintenance. These include, for instance, Madison and Porter's (2015,

2016) Parasocial Imagined Interaction Scale and PSR Attributes Scale that assesses specific imaginary interactions that media users can have with their PSR partner (see details and items in see Chapter 4 in this volume). Qualitative research can also be instrumental in uncovering additional ways in which individuals maintain their PSRs between media exposure sessions. For example, Tukachinsky Forster (2021) discussed how her interviewees facilitated their PSR through consumption and creation of fan fiction that specifically describes a relationship between the readers themselves and the media personae.

A second, related question is, How do PSRs emerge and evolve over time? The bulk of research in this field continues to rely on either cross-sectional surveys or single-exposure experiments. There is a paucity of longitudinal research that allows capturing the dynamic nature of mediated relationships (Liebers & Schramm, 2019), tracking the evolution of the media user from zero history through stages of establishing the PSR.

It is easy to see why there is such a glaring gap in the literature. Longitudinal research requires a significant expansion of resources and is logistically complex. Beyond the challenges associated with pace of data collection, subject recruitment, compensation, and retention, the data can be proven difficult to manage. For one, many communication researchers are not well versed in statistical techniques, such as time series analysis or growth curve modeling, and may feel outside of their comfort zone considering the sophisticated statistical analyses that are needed to take full advantage of the richness of longitudinal data. Moreover, Tukachinsky and Stever (2019) suggested a measure of parasocial relational stages that utilizes a different (lengthy) battery of items that taps into the unique characteristics of each relational step. The measure is yet to be developed and validated, but one can already wonder about the practicality of this approach.

Given these complexities, a lot of the assumptions advanced in this chapter, such that PSRs are dynamic and change over time, are mostly based on correlational data and logic rather than consistent and generalizable evidence. Hence, as often happens in science, theoretical models, including those outlined in this chapter, seem to outrun data and empirical support, which leaves theories vulnerable to alternative explanations and challenges resulting from future evidence.

One can take some solace, however, in the fact that, at least in the last few years, more and more longitudinal studies of PSR have accumulated (e.g., Bond et al., 2022a), largely supporting the dynamic nature of mediated relationships as predicted by relevant theories and models. However, inconsistent findings (Siegenthaler et al., 2021) call for further investigation of the processes underlying PSRs, their moderators, and boundary conditions. Thus, it is an exciting time to study and theorize about the dynamic nature of PSRs, and, as such, the three models outlined in this chapter can serve as a promising roadmap to explore more deeply the predictors responsible for the initiation of PSRs, as well as its distinct phases, and their cognitive, affective, and behavioral manifestations.

For instance, if we acknowledge that PSRs, just like social relationships, must need constant care and attention to grow and develop, it would be interesting to

explore the variety of strategies individuals use to sustain PSRs with favorite media personae. Rather than solely measuring PSR intensity after each exposure session, research should investigate what it is, exactly, that media users do between those media encounters. In the same way that we set up reminders to call our parents, make sure to free up time to accommodate the schedule of our partners, or spend time thinking about a friend shopping for a birthday gift for them, individuals may employ a variety of strategies to keep the spark alive in PSRs. However, PSRs (unlike PSIs) are theorized to exist not only while individuals consume the media message but also "offline," and yet, there is little to no empirical research on how the PSRs are managed outside of media exposure. There is a dire need for much more research on and theorization of retrospective involvement with characters (Ewoldsen & Grady, 2021), specifically examining how PSRs are maintained offline.

The current chapter focused specifically on the growth of positive, friendship-like PSRs. However, despite the strides that are made by scholarship on how PSRs can crumble and fall apart (see Chapter 6), there is still a need for a systematic theoretical model of the "coming apart" stages of PSRs. Furthermore, it is also important to continue growing the theorization and empirical investigation of nonamicable PSRs (see Chapter 17 in this volume) that are likely to follow different trajectories from the positive PSRs discussed here. Last, keeping in mind that development and maintenance of social relationships differs across cultures, it remains indefensible to continue relying, almost exclusively, on Western-centric data to learn about the initiation and evolution of PSRs. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 19 in this volume, lessons from cross-cultural studies that have uncovered a wide range of cultural differences in many aspects of romantic, friendships, and family relationships (Kito et al., 2017) underscore the importance of cross-cultural comparisons between how PSRs are initiated and maintained.

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CHAPTER

6 Parasocial Relationship Dissolution and Deterioration

Mu Hu

Abstract

This chapter discusses how media users cope with challenges to their parasocial relationships (PSRs) and PSR termination. One of the most striking characteristics of modern mass media is the formation of PSRs, the relationships between audiences and media characters and figures. Researchers from a variety of disciplines have devoted substantial efforts to understanding its initiation, development, and maintenance. First, the chapter discusses how individuals cope with the termination of a PSR, particularly making sense of a celebrity's death and coping with loss. Next, the chapter examines ways in which individuals can reconcile their feelings toward the celebrity and disapproval of the celebrity's behavior, discussing parasocial forgiveness, denial, or parasocial breakup (PSB).

Key Words: Parasocial relationships, parasocial breakup, celebrity, death, grief, misbehavior, transgression

Introduction

One of the most striking characteristics of modern mass media is the formation of a parasocial relationship (PSR), the relationship between audiences and media characters and figures (called "personae"). On the one hand, PSR is illusive because it is "one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). On the other hand, it is intimate because audiences may view their PSRs with personae as genuine and interpret this one-sided relationship as reciprocal (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In the past few decades, researchers from a variety of disciplines have devoted substantial efforts to understanding its initiation, development, and maintenance.

A parasocial relationship is a long-term and enduring relationship that can exist outside of audiences' media use processes. Therefore, it can profoundly influence various aspects of audiences' lives (Dibble et al., 2016; Giles, 2002; Hartmann et al., 2008; Klimmt et al., 2006). Two of the most important functions of PSRs are to provide companionship and meet people's social needs (Rosengren & Windahl, 1972). Therefore, if certain incidents risk losing or threatening PSRs, they may cause negative experiences in

audiences. A growing body of literature has been accumulated recently to examine the influence of the incidents that lead to PSR dissolution or deterioration.

This chapter provides an overview of the social scientific research that centers on PSR dissolution and deterioration, with a main focus on the empirical studies in the past two decades. PSR dissolution refers to the termination of PSRs because personae are unavailable or inactive in media (e.g., deaths, finales of shows, retirement, etc.). PSR deterioration, on the other hand, occurs when some incidents happen to personae and cause PSRs to decline. Although communication researchers seem to show most enthusiasm, the examinations of these subjects are interdisciplinary, and the publications in this vein of research are visible in a wide span of areas.

PSR Dissolution

Dissolution is a well-established area in interpersonal relationship research. Dissolution can cause serious emotional reactions and motivate people to seek psychological assistance (McCarthy et al., 1997). People's willingness to stay in a relationship is strongly related to their dependence on the relationship (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992). When facing dissolutions, individuals who are more preoccupied with relationships undergo more negative emotions and find the dissolutions harder to cope with (Barbara & Dion, 2000). These studies constitute the foundation of later PSR dissolution research. Media researchers either derived their research questions and hypotheses from the findings of these studies or applied interpersonal relationship dissolution theories and models to their analysis of PSR dissolution. The incidents examined in PSR dissolution research primarily revolve around the following three situations: deaths of personae, personae taken off the air, and audiences' growth.

Deaths of Personae

Meyrowitz's (1994) discussion of fans' reactions to the deaths of celebrities, albeit anecdotal in nature, is the earliest work to discuss dissolution in parasocial literature. He noticed the aftermath of celebrities' deaths (e.g., John Lennon, Elvis Presley, and John Kennedy) and vividly described fans' mourning activities. Scattered fans across distant lands were "united" by their shared intimacy and collectively participated in various forms of activities like a ritual, suggesting that the grief was not only personal but also social. Fans gathered in streets and parks or held vigils near the celebrities' homes and places of death, called radio stations through the phone lines specifically opened for them to vent their sense of helplessness, and watched the memorial documentaries, which revived the sounds and images of the celebrities. There were even multiple incidents where fans died by suicide because of their intolerable sadness.

Meyrowitz's (1994) perspective in this essay is inductive rather than deductive. The researcher observed this phenomenon from the angles of both media and fans. On the one hand, media became the channels to lead and organize mourning activities (e.g., special

reports and retrospectives in memory of the late celebrities). On the other hand, fans formed new cognitions and emotions about the celebrities because of their deaths. Some celebrities became more widely accepted after death despite the controversies over them during their lifetime. Fans expected the children of the deceased celebrities to inherit their parents' talent. Different generations in the same household were connected with each other because of their common PSRs.

Meyrowitz (1994) further argued that media friends never die, and PSRs are embalmed. In other words, the death of a media friend does not announce the ending of a PSR. Most fans get to know their media friends and develop their PSRs exclusively through mediated fares such as television programs, music, and films. After the media friends pass away, these media artifacts are still available, and thus the chances to meet the media friends do not diminish. Yet it is intriguing, contended the author, that the sense of "loss" is so profound.

There is no shortage of anecdotal accounts of public profound grief reactions to the death of celebrities—from the Hollywood star Valentino in 1926 (Shulman, 1967) to Princess Diana in 1997 (Brown et al., 2003). The subsequent more systematic empirical studies that examined this subject revealed how social media contributed to the formation of new genres of parasocial grief. Social media have become important venues through which fans develop and maintain PSRs with personae. When personae pass away, fans' grief appears on social media just like online mourning for family and friends (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). Although the mourning activities described by Meyrowitz persist, social media maximize people's ability to connect with each other and engage in grief activities together. Instead of being passive receivers of memorial content created by mass media, fans on social media can create their own content to memorize the celebrities and share it with other fans. This strand of research adopted either content analysis or survey to reveal fans' cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to personae's deaths.

Through a thematic analysis of fans' postings of the pop star Michael Jackson's death on Twitter, TMZ.com, and Facebook, Sanderson and Cheong (2010) found that social media facilitated traditional grieving stages by letting fans not only disclose their own feelings but also join others' grieving behaviors. By producing and disseminating their own content, fans invented personalized approaches in memory of the deceased star. By communicating grief with the massive others who were geographically and culturally distant, fans felt a strong sense of empowerment that might be otherwise unavailable in their personal social networks. Furthermore, fans' responses to a celebrity's death change over time. The researchers used Kubler-Ross's stages of grief model (1969) to capture the changes of fans' postings within 4 weeks after the star's death. According to this model, there are five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. All these five stages were visible in the fans' postings but exhibited different trends. Denial, acceptance, and bargaining all showed a declining trend, while anger remained stable. It is worth noting that both denial and acceptance were highly prominent, while bargaining and anger were

quite minimal. Furthermore, "critical" emerged as a new and unique category which is not within Kubler-Ross model. Some fans used this opportunity to speak out their frustration against the star for the sexual harassment accusation.

Similarly, Bingaman (2020) analyzed fans' posts on Reddit.com about the NBA star Kobe Bryant's death, demonstrating how the content of the posts shifted over time. On the first day after Bryant's death, the responses of grief mainly consisted of sadness and shock, while 2 weeks later, the top three emotions were sadness, shock, and love. During this period, the percentages of the posts that expressed sadness and shock declined significantly while those demonstrating love and confusion increased gradually.

The influence of a celebrity's death on audiences sometimes goes beyond grief. It can also make audiences pay attention to specific health issues that cause the death of the celebrity. Famed American comedian Robin Williams died by suicide in 2014, bringing the discussion of depression and mental health into the media spotlight. Social media became a forum of bereavement and seeking mental health information. In a survey to American adults, the strength of PSRs with Robin Williams was positively related to how often they shared mental health topics (e.g., depression awareness and treatment, suicide prevention, etc.) on social media, which was positively mediated by their feelings of grief (E. L. Cohen & Hoffner, 2016). Furthermore, positive meaning making, a cognitive strategy to spot positive elements in a negative situation, was a moderator between grief and health information sharing. For those who were more engaged in positive meaning making to cope with Robin Williams' suicide, more grief led to more frequent health information sharing. Such an effect, however, did not emerge in those who were less engaged in positive meaning making. Hoffner and Cohen (2018) further discovered that those with stronger PSRs with Robin Williams perceived less distance from the people diagnosed with clinical depression and were more willing to seek professional treatment for depression. More exposure to news coverage celebrating the comedian's life and professional success was associated with lower levels of stigma and more support of public mental health resources.

The personae mentioned in Meyrowitz's (1994) essay are all media figures, such as singers, politicians, comedians, and actors. However, a couple of recent studies have shown that fictional television characters' deaths can also arouse grief feelings and lead to mourning behaviors. Lawrence Kutner, a character in Fox's television show *House, M.D.*, died by suicide in the fifth season of the show in 2009. DeGroot and Leith (2018) analyzed the posts on Kutner's Facebook memorial page wall. Despite the fictional nature of this character, viewers expressed various emotions of grief, including sadness, shock, longing, love, and confusion.

Daniel and Westerman (2017) examined the stages of audiences' responses to the character John Snow's death in HBO's television series *Game of Thrones*. The researchers analyzed a total of 951 randomly selected tweets posted within 10 days after John Snow's death. The researchers also used Kubler-Ross's stages of grief model to examine the

content change over time. Ninety-three percent of the posts could be categorized into the five stages in the model. Anger and bargaining stayed consistent throughout the 10 days. Consistent with the model, depression was high in the middle and lessened in the end, while acceptance increased over time. However, contrary to the model's prediction, denial increased rather than decreased with the passage of time. The researchers postulated that the fictional nature of the show allowed viewers to develop hopes that the show writers will find a way to bring the character back. They proposed that the posts were used both to express emotions and to communicate grief and that communication between the users may influence the pattern of the development of grief. It is also noteworthy that the grief over a television character in this study exhibited both similarities and uniqueness, in contrast to the grief over Michael Jackson shown in the aforementioned Sanderson and Cheong's study (2010).

Parasocial grief sometimes can blur the line between reality and the fictional world in a television show. Jack Pearson, a television character in NBC's drama *This Is Us*, was killed in a fire caused by a faulty knob on a Crockpot® slow cooker. The stock for the maker of the slow cooker dropped significantly within 2 days after the episode had been aired. By comparing the plots of *This Is Us*, viewers' and Crockpot's social media responses, and a promotion video for the show and the brand, Foss (2020) found that the fans' expression of grief was influenced by their PSRs with the character and their anger over the brand of the slow cooker. As part of the "Crockpot is innocent" campaign, the company hired Milo Ventimiglia (the actor who played Jack Pearson) to make an appearance in a Super Bowl commercial. The commercial, in which he appeared in character, speaking directly to the viewers as he poured chili from the slow cooker and assured the viewers of the brand's safety, did ameliorate the viewers' attitudes toward the brand.

Personae Taken Off the Air

Another vein of PSR dissolution research focuses on the situations in which personae are taken off the air. J. Cohen (2003) launched this line of research by proposing the concept of "parasocial breakup (PSB)," namely, audiences' negative reactions to the loss of PSRs. Noticing the anecdotal data of extreme reactions to PSR dissolution in Meyrowitz's essay (1994), J. Cohen (2003) proposed conducting systematic research investigating this phenomenon. The researcher devised a PSB scale by adapting the scale originally used by Barbara and Dion (2000) to examine postbreakup reactions in interpersonal relationships. Then the researcher used the PSB scale to measure people's emotional and behavioral reactions if their favorite television personae were taken off the air. Based on the responses from three different samples consisting of adults and teens, the researcher found that PSB resembles people's reactions to interpersonal relationship dissolutions. Furthermore, there was a substantial and positive association between the strength of PSR and PSB. However, gender was the most significant predictor of PSR, while age predicted PSB, suggesting that there may not be a direct relationship between PSR and PSB.

In a later study, J. Cohen (2004) discovered that PSB was related to audiences' attachment styles. The researcher first identified three groups of individuals with distinctive attachment styles in a sample of Jewish Israeli adults. People with the secure attachment style felt comfortable with intimacy and interdependence. Anxious style was characterized by greater desire for intimacy than one's partner but less trust in the future of the relationship. Those with avoidant styles tended to avoid intimacy and dependence and have low levels of trust in others. When asked how they would respond if their favorite television personae were off the air, anxious individuals reported higher levels of PSB in contrast to the other two groups, while secure and avoidant individuals were not significantly different from each other in PSBs. In addition, the strength of PSR was found to be a mediator between PSB and attachment styles, which echoes a couple of prior studies showing the connections between attachment styles and PSR (J. Cohen, 1997; Cole & Leets, 1999). The findings suggest that how attachment styles are linked to reactions to the breakup of relationships is similar in interpersonal relationships and mediated relationships with television personae.

In both studies, J. Cohen asked the respondents to imagine their reactions to a hypothetical scenario. This approach has its merits (e.g., overcoming recollection bias) and is suitable for the studies aiming at capturing mental models of PSB. However, it may not reflect people's responses to an actual incident where personae are taken off the air. People's responses reported in these two studies may be more likely to reflect their thoughts about how they should respond rather than their actual experiences (J. Cohen, 2003, 2004). For instance, J. Cohen (2003) speculated that the small variability and low mean scores of PSB might be caused by this hypothetical approach.

In contrast, three later studies investigated audiences' PSB in response to real events. Eyal and Cohen (2006) examined fans' reactions to the end of the sitcom *Friends*. In this situation, the respondents' PSB scores did exhibit more variability and higher mean scores in contrast to the previous two PSB studies. A PSR with the favorite character in the show was also found to be positively related to PSB. In addition, PSB was predicted by audiences' commitment to viewing the sitcom, affinity to the show, perceived popularity of the personae, and loneliness. Furthermore, women showed significantly stronger PSRs in contrast to men, but there was no significant gender difference in PSB.

Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011) investigated audiences' reactions to a disruption of television programs due to a strike of writers. Again, people with stronger PSRs experienced greater PSB regardless of the number of programs that went off the air. In addition, television affinity, viewing for instrumental purposes, and viewing with companionship motives were also related to PSB.

Some fans nowadays not only consume media content but also create their own original content based on the media content they consume. Therefore, other audiences are exposed to not only the media content but also the original content created by these fans. Two examples of fan-created content are fan theories and spoilers. The former one

refers to fans' ideas, interpretations, and speculations about media content, and therefore they may or may not be true, while the latter one is the leakage and dissemination of the actual plots of shows. A recent study has reported intriguing findings about the influence of fan theories and spoilers on enjoyment and PSB (Ellithorpe & Brookes, 2018). The research participants were asked to fill out a two-part survey that examined their reactions to the finale of the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother.* Audiences' believing in fan theories and exposure to spoilers were associated with an increase in enjoyment and a decrease in PSB after the finale. The associations were mediated by audiences' expectations of how the sitcom would end and their judgment of whether the ending made sense, namely, mental model resonance. These findings challenge the intuitive assumption that receiving spoiler information prior to viewing will undermine the positive aspects of viewing experiences. They provide evidence that audiences are highly active when processing media content. Audiences' affective reactions to narratives after exposure, both positive (e.g., enjoyment) and negative (PSB), are the outcomes of the comparison between their mental models before viewing and the narratives they are exposed to during viewing.

Audiences' Growth

PSB can occur not only because of unexpected, abrupt, and uncontrollable incidents but also because of the growth of audiences. Growth suggests an individual's cognitive development and transition to a new stage of life. This transition is particularly important in early childhood. Bond and Calvert (2014) contended that children outgrow the media characters designed for children, such as Elmo in *Sesame Street*. Children grow physically, cognitively, and socially, while media characters do not. This mismatch may cause children's PSRs with these characters to end. The researchers conducted a survey of the parents of children who were 2 to 8 years old. More than 40% of the parents reported that they had observed the occurrence of PSB in their children. As proposed by the researchers, maturation was found to be the leading cause of PSB, followed by competitive influence of other characters, habituation due to overexposure, family and peer influences, and alterations of programs. PSB was positively related to the amount of exposure after controlling for age, suggesting that the longer children watch television programs, the higher levels of PSB they experience. Consistent with the research findings about gender roles in developmental psychology, boys tended to break up with female characters in favor of male characters as they grew older. This reflects the development of their masculinity under the influence of gender expectations. Although this trend was not found in girls' PSB with male characters, girls became more interested in the characters possessing more feminine characteristics when they grew older.

There is a paucity of research on outgrowing PSRs in adulthood, but anecdotal evidence speaks to this, for example, in parasocial romantic relationships. Several interviewees in Tukachinsky Forster's (2021) research reported that they had very intense "obsession" with a media figure that lasted for months, which eventually dissipated or was replaced

by a PSR with a different media personality. They described their experience as a sense of "release" and "fading" of the "compulsion" (p. 116). Other interviewees claimed that they intentionally weaned themselves off PSRs that they felt to be excessive and unhealthy.

PSR Deterioration

Some incidents may not lead to PSR dissolution but cause PSR deterioration instead. If audiences find their PSRs unsatisfying, they are free to withdraw (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In his seminal work of PSB, J. Cohen (2003) pointed out that "exploring what happens when viewers decide to break off a parasocial relationship would also be interesting (i.e., to stop watching a show)—that is, whether the reasons they lose interest in their parasocial partners are similar to the reasons given for the breakup of social relationships" (p. 200). Similarly, after analyzing viewers' reactions to the finale of *Friends*, Eyal and J. Cohen (2006) contended that PSB may happen not only because a show ends or a character is taken off the show but also because something happens to the actor or actress who plays the character. The PSB may further cause viewers to cease watching the show and to lose their interests in the character.

Before parasocial researchers embarked on their investigations into this issue, several media studies had provided empirical evidence demonstrating the negative influence of certain incidents on public figures' images. For instance, Ungar and Sev'er (1989) investigated people's reactions to the fall of the former Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson. For his use of anabolic steroids, Johnson was stripped of the gold medal received for the men's 100-meter dash at the 1988 Summer Olympics. The results of the study showed that people generally accepted the truthfulness of Johnson's drug use despite their admiration for this national hero. People tended to attribute it to situational rather than dispositional factors and believed that Johnson was the victim of sabotage.

Kiousis (2003) conducted a longitudinal study to examine the relationship between news coverage of the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal and public opinions of President Bill Clinton. The researcher compared the content of *New York Times* newspapers and *ABC World News Tonight* broadcasts and the results of several national polls measuring people's perceived job approval and favorability of Clinton in 1998. Cross-lagged analysis showed that media coverage was positively related to perceived favorability but negatively related to job approval, while the relationship to favorability was stronger than to job approval. The author argued that the value of these findings is twofold. First, they provide support to second-level agenda setting and attribute priming. Second, they demonstrate the distinctions between cognitive–performance assessments (job approval) and emotional–personal evaluations (favorability) as responses to negative incidents involving public figures.

Media Figures' Transgressions

In response to J. Cohen's (2003) and Eyal and Cohen's (2006) propositions, some researchers examined how audiences react to the incidents that cause PSRs to deteriorate. Most of

the studies in this line have focused on media figures' transgressions. Transgressions refer to the incidents committed by actors that violate observers' expectations of how the actors should behave (Thompson et al., 2005). Similar to the PSR dissolution studies mentioned above, PSR deterioration studies have employed diverse research methods to explore this subject.

E. L. Cohen (2010) reviewed the prior PSR dissolution research and pointed out the necessity to examine viewer-initiated breakup, particularly how audiences may voluntarily withdraw from PSRs because of their negative reactions to media figures' transgressions. The researcher adopted a survey design similar to the design used in J. Cohen's studies (2003, 2004) and asked respondents to imagine the influence of their liked media figures' transgressions on them. Specifically, respondents rated their expected closeness reduction caused by moral, trust, and social transgressions committed by a same-gender media figure and a close friend, respectively. The respondents expected greater closeness reduction in PSRs than in friendships for moral transgressions, but there was no difference of closeness reduction between media figures and friends for trust and social transgressions.

A few other studies investigated people's actual reactions to media figures' transgressions. A couple of studies adopted content analysis to study fans' reactions to sports athletes' transgressions. Sanderson (2010) compared the press coverage about the golf star Tiger Woods's extramarital affair and people's Facebook postings about this incident. The press articles presented a large amount of sensationally lewd details and framed this incident as a tragic flaw of a lurid sexual lifestyle. In contrast, fans' postings on the athlete's official Facebook page showed that most fans viewed it as a private matter and manifestation of human nature. Only a small percentage of fans expressed their disappointment and treated it as a reflection of the athlete's true moral character. The inconsistency between the content in these platforms has multiple implications. First, newspaper readers can develop their own cognitive frames of public figures' scandals (Kepplinger et al., 2012). Second, social media is a forum for fans to interact with each other, and thus the postings are not only for expressing but also for communicating purposes. Third, public figures can use social media as a crisis management tool to counteract the negative media coverage about their transgressions.

Sanderson and Emmons (2014) investigated fans' forgiveness of media figures' transgressions. The researchers analyzed the postings in a discussion forum on the Texas Rangers official website in response to the baseball star Josh Hamilton's apologia for his alcohol relapse. A number of themes emerged from the postings, which reflected the complexity of fans' feelings. Some fans extended their forgiveness by expressing support, understanding the hardship of overcoming addiction, blaming the hostile environment, and toning down the severity of the incident. Some others, however, withheld their forgiveness by blaming the star for the lack of willpower, trying to seek attention, and insincerity. Although these two studies provide comprehensive qualitative data of people's responses, they offer limited evidence why people's responses are different. For instance, Sanderson

and Emmons (2014) pointed out that one of their study's limitations is the lack of quantitative measures to assess the strength of fans' relationships with Hamilton such as fanship, identification, and PSR.

Jones et al. (2022) interviewed the fans of Kevin Spacey and asked them to reflect upon their reactions toward the actor's sexual misconduct allegations. The fans' expressions of their "para-loveshock," the disorienting after-effects of falling out of love, primarily revolved around three themes: grief enfranchisement; flagellation; and indignation. The first theme reflects people's endeavors to seek similar feelings from the like-minded others in order to justify their own sense of heartbreak, which may not be accepted or supported by social norms. The second theme refers to fans' self-reproach thoughts in search of their share of the culpability of the celebrity's transgression. These thoughts, although as imaginary as a PSR itself, convince the fans of the legitimacy of their commitment to the celebrity. The third theme shows fans' efforts to attribute their negative reactions to broad moral issues underlying the transgression rather than personal fandom. These efforts help the fans refrain from being judged (particularly by non-fans of the celebrity) as shallow and stigmatized as obsessive and irrational.

Unlike television shows' endings, media figures' transgressions cannot be predicted in advance. In order to capture the causal relationship between transgressions and audiences' reactions, Hu and colleagues (Hu, 2016; Hu et al., 2018, 2019) conducted a series of studies by using concocted news stories as the experimental stimuli. In one of the studies (Hu, 2016), reading a news story about a celebrity's domestic violence scandal caused a significant decrease of PSR. However, when the participants were watching a movie played by the celebrity after reading the news story, the scandal had no influence on their parasocial interaction (PSI) with the character played by the celebrity. In addition, the audiences with stronger PSRs experienced greater PSR decrease as a result of the scandal. Hu et al. (2018) further found that audiences' liking of celebrities moderated their reactions toward celebrities' transgressions. Liked celebrities' transgressions, in contrast to disliked celebrities' transgressions, caused greater PSR reduction. People's interpretations of celebrities' transgressions were influenced by their fundamental attribution error (FAE). Although the transgressions of the liked and the disliked celebrities were manipulated to be identical in the experiment, people were more likely to attribute disliked celebrities' transgressions to dispositional factors while the liked celebrities' transgressions were attributed to situational factors. Furthermore, despite the greater PSR reduction with liked media figures, due to FAE, people were more likely to forgive the liked media figures. Hu et al. (2019) investigated the role of apology in audiences' reactions to a celebrity's transgression. The research participants in the experimental condition read a news story about a celebrity's irresponsible driving followed by the celebrity's apology statement. Those in the control condition read the irresponsible driving story only without the apology statement. The apology alleviated PSR reduction caused by the news story, but there was no difference between the two groups in terms of negative emotional reactions and forgiveness. Taken

together, a trend of "more love, more hurt, but more lenient" seems to emerge in these three studies. People with stronger PSR reported more PSR reduction, more negative emotional reactions, but more forgiveness for celebrities' transgressions. They also interpreted the celebrity's apology in a more positive way, which mediated the relationship between PSR and forgiveness. These findings provide quantitative data demonstrating the role of PSR in how people react to media figures' transgressions.

In contrast to Hu and colleagues' experimental studies, Tukachinsky Forster's interviews (2021) revealed fans' dilemmas when facing the moral transgressions committed by the celebrities they loved. Despite the fans' negative attitudes toward the transgressions, they retained their love for the celebrities. The fans employed different strategies to reduce their cognitive dissonance and defend their forgiveness of the beloved celebrities. These strategies included choosing not to believe the news reports about the transgressions, seeking excuses for the celebrities, or discounting the transgression severity.

Some other researchers, however, proposed that PSR is not the only factor that influences people's responses to media figures' transgressions. Lee et al. (2018) found that people's forgiveness of sports celebrities' transgressions was a result of the interaction between their PSRs, regulatory focus orientation (promotion-focused vs. prevention focused), and perception of the celebrity's ethical intent (acquisitive intent vs. protective intent) to commit the transgressions. The researcher conducted three experimental studies using concocted press releases to examine the influences of the three independent variables on forgiveness. The first study showed that people with stronger positive PSRs were more forgiving of sports celebrities' transgressions by protective intent but were less forgiving of the celebrities' transgressions motivated by acquisitive intent. In the second study, the promotion-focused individuals with stronger PSRs were more forgiving of acquisitive-intent-motivated transgressions than the prevention-focused individuals. In the third study, which investigated disliked sports celebrities, promotion-focused individuals were more forgiving of the celebrities' protective-intent-motivated transgressions in contrast to the prevention-focused individuals.

E. L. Cohen et al. (2021) differentiated between liking and PSR by proposing that people can be bonded to disliked media figures and feel disconnected from liked ones. Therefore, the researchers did not use the popular PSR scales (e.g., A. M. Rubin & Perse, 1987; A. M. Rubin et al., 1985), which have been used to primarily measure people's PSRs with their favorite or liked personae. Rather, they adopted Bocarnea and Brown's (2007) celebrity-persona PSI scale to measure people's PSRs with celebrities in terms of interest, cognitive and affective engagement, and knowledge. The researchers investigated the interplay between liking and PSR in people's reactions to the celebrities who made sexual harassment allegations against the producer Harvey Weinstein. Greater liking of the celebrities was associated with higher levels of believing in the allegations and greater willingness to reveal personal sexual harassment experiences. However, the influence of liking on believability was suppressed by stronger PSRs. According to the authors, these

findings suggested that liking and PSR function differently when people are making judgment about how believable celebrities are. Specifically, people may be led by liking to interpret the celebrities' allegations through a heuristic route, while the role of liking is undermined by stronger PSRs, which guides people to assess the allegations through a more sophisticated route. The researchers further proposed that a PSR has multiple aspects, including liking, and people with stronger PSRs may rely more on PSR's other aspects than liking to evaluate transgressions.

Celebrities' influence sometimes can extend from the entertainment industry to the political realm, and many celebrities voice their opinions on various controversial political topics (see Chapter 15). Given that these questions are central to people's identity and morality, many individuals terminated interpersonal relationships with family and friends that they have disagreed with on these issues. Tukachinsky Forster and Downey (2022) examined whether the same happens in a parasocial context when celebrities make political statements that run contrary to the media users' beliefs. Indeed, the researchers found that disagreement damaged people's PSRs with the celebrities. However, those who did not feel strongly about the social issues and those who initially liked the celebrities very much retained their PSRs. They were able to do so by separating the celebrities' artistic work from their political opinions and by discounting the importance of the issues they disagreed on.

Fictional Characters' Transgressions

The research reviewed above examined the effect of transgressions on PSRs and PSB with celebrities and public figures. However, judgments of a media personality's morality can also play an important role in how audiences relate to fictional characters as well (Klimmt et al., 2006). Indeed, Bonus et al. (2021) found that audiences' PSRs with movie characters, despite their fictional nature, were also susceptible to the influence of the characters' moral transgressions. The researcher tracked the changes of their research participants' PSRs with the five main characters before and after the movie *Star Wars VIII: The Last Jedi* was released. The characters' immoral behaviors in the movie weakened the participants' PSRs. Moreover, this influence varied by the type of characters. Participants' PSRs with the primary villain character (Kylo) were strengthened when he was perceived as behaving more morally than expected, while PSRs with the primary hero character (Luke) were weakened when he was perceived as behaving either more or less morally than expected. The researcher conjectured that this may be due to the ceiling effects for the heroes and the floor effects for the villains.

Interestingly, however, viewers do not maintain a strict distinction between real and fictional characters and a transgression of the character may affect media users' PSRs with the actor that plays that character and vice versa. As reviewed above, Hu's (2016) study showed that a celebrity's domestic violence scandal negatively influenced people's PSRs with him but did not influence their PSI with a movie character played by him. Since

the researcher did not measure people's PSRs with the movie character, it is unknown whether such a difference is attributable to the PSR/PSI distinction or the celebrity/character difference. Koban et al. (2021) tested this hypothesis more directly by examining how likability of television characters (unlikable vs. likable) and the valence of concocted interviews given by the actors who played the characters (negative vs. positive) influence audiences' PSR with the character. The results show when an actor gave a positive interview, it had a positive effect on audiences' involvement with an unlikable character played by the actor. In contrast, when an actor who played a likable character gave a negative interview, it undermined people's PSRs with the character.

The opposite process, wherein the transgression of a fictional character taints the PSR with the actor that plays that character is also possible. Tukachinsky (2020) manipulated a movie to portray the character as either an innocent victim or a manipulative and dangerous villain. Tukachinsky found that after watching the villain version of the film, viewers reported an overall lower PSR with the *actor* that played that character than after watching the same actor playing a positive character. In turn, this dip in PSRs tainted the viewers' subsequent evaluation of the actor's endorsement in a campaign for donating to a children's hospital, making the audiences more cynical view of the actor's motives to participate in the campaign.

Media Figures' Romantic Relationship Involvement

As reviewed above, most of the transgressions examined in parasocial deterioration research are scandals, such as domestic violence, extramarital affairs, sexual harassment, and so forth. However, not all transgressions, namely, the incidents that violate audiences' expectations, are negative in nature. Furthermore, the scandals examined are all moral transgressions that should exert negative influences on PSRs in general, but PSRs may vary qualitatively by type. Therefore, a transgression that affects one type of PSR may not influence another type of PSR to the same extent. For instance, Tukachinsky (2011) proposed a theorization of dividing PSRs into parasocial love (PSL) and parasocial friendship (PSF), depending on whether audiences view personae as romantic lovers or friends.

Based on this proposition, Hu et al. (2021) directed their attention to how nonscandalous transgressions influenced different types of PSRs (PSL and PSF). The researchers examined the influence of celebrities' announcements of romantic relationship involvement on their romance fans and friendship fans. A survey study was conducted to investigate Chinese college students' expected responses (relationship closeness, positive and negative emotional reactions, and behavioral responses) to the announcements. As far as romance fans were concerned, the "love more, hurt more" pattern emerged again. The romance fans with stronger PSL expected less relationship closeness and more negative emotional reactions. When it came to the comparison between the two types of fans, romance fans reported more negative emotional reactions, while friendship fans reported more positive emotional reactions and were less likely to engage in destructive behavioral

responses. Hu and Kong (2022) further compared would-be lovers' expected reactions to their beloved ones' romantic relationship announcements in PSL and unrequited love. The researchers challenged the routine of comparing a PSR with a mutual interpersonal relationship (e.g., romantic relationship, friendship, etc.) in previous literature. They argued that PSL is more analogous to unrequited love because of their common one-sided nature. In their study which also used a Chinese college student sample, stronger relationships were associated with more negative emotional reactions in both PSL and unrequited love. People expected less negative emotional reactions and less relationship closeness reduction in PSL than in unrequited love. The strategies to cope with the announcements varied by both relationship type (PSL vs. unrequited love) and gender (male vs. female).

Building on Hu and Kong's (2022) study, Tukachinsky Forster (2022) conducted an in-depth interview and a survey to examine people's feelings of jealousy caused by their loved celebrities' engagement in real-life romantic relationships. The interview data showed that fans felt less jealousy when the parasocial romantic rival was also a celebrity (as opposed to another fan), the romantic relationship exhibited a positive impact on the celebrity, and the relationship was committed (rather than casual). The survey results did not replicate the finding concerning the rival's celebrity status as a moderator. However, the survey revealed that people's jealousy was stronger for those who were younger when they engaged in the parasocial romantic relationships (PSRRs) with the celebrities. Jealousy intensity also depended on the intensity of the PSRR and how much they invested in the PSRR. Individuals also varied in how they responded to the jealousy-provoking situation. PSRRs (in particular its emotional component) predicted rival-centered responses (e.g., threatening the rival), constructive communication, and denial/avoidance jealousy responses.

Concluding Thoughts and Future Directions

This chapter drew a brief sketch outlining the complicated ways that people react to actual and potential PSR dissolution and deterioration incidents. Some findings were consistent across the studies, such as the association between stronger PSRs and more negative reactions. However, there were also significant variations in the reactions to different types of incidents. In order to let the readers have a "bird's-eye view," Table 6.1 summarizes the empirical studies in this vein of PSR research reviewed in this chapter.

The growing body of PSR dissolution and deterioration research, together with the PSR development and maintenance studies, reveals the resemblance of a PSR to an interpersonal relationship. This body of research, as well as the other areas of PSR research chronicled in this volume, represents an epitome of mass media's influence on human society. People come to know the personae in media as they build interpersonal relationships with others in real life. Accordingly, their paths of PSRs and interpersonal relationships are intertwined with each other. People discuss personae in their daily conversations with others, compare personae to the ones whom they know in person, and use the rules

Table 6.1 The Chronicle of Empirical PSR Dissolution and Deterioration Studies			
Study	Method	Sample	Incident
J. Cohen (2003)	Survey	381 adults and 82 high school students in Israel	Hypothetical scenario: What if favorite television personae are taken off the air
J. Cohen (2004)	Survey	381 Israeli adults	Hypothetical scenario: What if favorite television personae are taken off the air
Eyal and Cohen (2006)	Survey	279 undergraduate students in the United States	End of the sitcom *Friends*
E. L. Cohen (2010)	Survey	125 undergraduate students in the United States	Hypothetical trust, social, minor moral, and major moral transgressions by same-gender famous media figures
Sanderson (2010)	Content analysis	100 newspaper articles between December 2, 2009 (the date that reports of Woods's infidelity began breaking) and February 20, 2010 (the day after Woods's televised apology) and 650 discussion board postings on Tiger Woods's official Facebook page	Golf star Tiger Woods's marital infidelity
Sanderson and Cheong (2010)	Thematic analysis	747 tweets on Twitter, 798 postings on TMZ.com, and 643 postings on Facebook	Pop star Michael Jackson's death
Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011)	Survey	403 undergraduate students in the United States	Television shows stopped airing due to a television writers' strike during 2007–2008
Bond and Calvert (2014)	Survey	122 parents in the United States whose children ranged in age from 2 to 8 years old	Children's growth
Sanderson and Emmons (2014)	Thematic analysis	474 postings in a discussion forum on the Texas Rangers official website	Baseball star Josh Hamilton's alcohol relapse
E. L. Cohen and Hoffner (2016)	Survey	281 residents in the United States	Actor Robin Williams's death
Hu (2016)	Experiment	198 undergraduate students in the United States	Concocted news story about a celebrity's domestic violence
Daniel and Westerman (2017)	Content analysis	951 tweets on Twitter	Character John Snow's death in HBO's television show *Game of Thrones*

(*continued*)

Table 6.1 Continued

Study	Method	Sample	Incident
DeGroot and Leith (2018)	Thematic analysis	232 posts on Facebook	The character Lawrence Kutner's death in Fox's television show *House, M.D.*
Ellithorpe and Brookes (2018)	Survey	403 undergraduate students in the United States	End of the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*
Hoffner and Cohen (2018)	Survey	350 adults in the United States	Actor Robin Williams's death
Hu et al. (2018)	Experiment	137 undergraduate students in the United States	Concocted news stories about two (liked and disliked) celebrities' minor and major transgressions
Lee et al. (2018) Study 1	Experiment	123 participants enrolled via Amazon Mechanical Turk	Concocted press releases about sports celebrities use of performance-enhancing drugs
Lee et al. (2018) Study 2	Experiment	125 participants enrolled via Amazon Mechanical Turk	Concocted press releases about sports celebrities defrauding charity
Lee et al. (2018) Study 3	Experiment	119 college students	Concocted press releases about sports celebrities taking illicit funds from boosters to influence game outcomes
Hu et al. (2019)	Experiment	137 undergraduate students in the United States	Concocted news story about a celebrity's drunk and driving and speeding
Bingaman (2020)	Content analysis	398 comments on Reddit	Sports star Kobe Bryant's death
Foss (2020)	Content analysis	36 episodes of *This Is Us*, posts, tweets, and replies between January 23, 2018, through February 6, 2018, and the promotional video featuring Crockpot	Character Jack Pearson's death in NBC's television show *This Is Us*
Bonus et al. (2021)	Survey	161 adults in the United States enrolled via Amazon Mechanical Turk	Expectancy violations of hero and villain characters in the movie *Star Wars VIII: The Last Jedi*
E. L. Cohen et al. (2021)	Experiment	296 participants enrolled via Amazon Mechanical Turk	Celebrities' sexual harassment allegations against the producer Harvey Weinstein
Hu et al. (2021)	Survey	224 college students in China	Hypothetical scenario: What if parasocial lovers announce romantic relationship involvement

Table 6.1 Continued			
Study	Method	Sample	Incident
Tukachinsky (2020)	Experiment	174 college students in the United States	An actor plays a role of a villain (a con woman that gets men robbed and assaulted)
Koban et al. (2021) Study 1	Experiments	165 college students in Germany	Concocted interview with an actor that plays either a liked or a disliked character, making victim-blaming statements and defending an alleged perpetrator of sexual misconduct
Koban et al. (2021) Study 2	Experiments	136 college students in Germany	Concocted interview with an actor that plays either a liked or a disliked character in *Modern Family* and expresses antigay statements
Tukachinsky Forster (2021)	Interview	26 adults	Parasocial lovers' misbehavior, such as driving under the influence, assaulting a photographer, or talking disrespectfully about fans
Tukachinsky Forster and Downey (2022)	Experiment	382 undergraduate students in the United States	Concocted celebrities' tweets making political statements on gun control and immigration, contrary to fans' beliefs
Hu and Kong (2022)	Survey	330 college students in China	Hypothetical scenario: What if the beloved ones in parasocial love and unrequited love announce romantic relationship involvement
Tukachinsky Forster (2022) Study 1	Interview	26 adults	Parasocial lovers engaged in real-life romantic relationships
Tukachinsky Forster (2022) Study 2	Survey	426 adults	Parasocial lovers engaged in real-life romantic relationships
Jones et al. (2022)	Interview	15 adults	Actor Kevin Spacey's sexual misconduct allegations

of morals and ethics they learn from interpersonal communication practices to evaluate personae. Media not only physically and mechanically embed these personae into media users' time and space but also rhetorically and organically mold them into the media users' living experiences (Piccirillo, 1986). To media users, personae are more than humanoid audio, visual, or textual symbols that come from a disparate matrix. Rather, they are

perceived as intimate human beings who are "around" even though such an intimacy can only be observed at a distance.

Despite the fruitfulness of these PSR dissolution and deterioration studies, they should be viewed as an overture rather than an epilogue. As this path of research continues, a number of future directions of scholarship may be worth researchers' attention. First, the nature of some PSR dissolution incidents needs more theoretical consideration. For instance, on the one hand, Meyrowitz's (1994) argument that media friends never die is reasonable. After their deaths, they are still available "there," namely, media, where fans get to know them. Fans still have access to the artifacts (e.g., music, films, etc.) the media friends produced while they were alive. On the other hand, they are *not* available in that fans will not see anything *new* from them (except such cases as "never-before-seen video footages"). The artifacts are more analogous to the belongings of passing friends. Seeing an actor in a movie made before his death is analogous to seeing a deceased relative in a family video. Fans can still meet their passing media friends, but they understand that there will be no new encounters with them, while acquiring new information about personae is critical to the development of PSRs (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Fans of Robin Williams certainly can continue to watch his *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Jumanji*, but it is a reminiscence of the past PSR. No matter how much his fans wish he could, the comedian cannot make new movies. In contrast, fans of Tom Hanks may have watched him playing numerous inspiring roles from Forrest Gump to Mr. Rogers, but they can still expect to see him in a new movie. Therefore, it is not the availability of past meetings, but the chances of new meetings that demarcate the life and death of media friends.

Second, readers need to be cautious when trying to draw generalization conclusions from these studies. None of the studies involving human subjects adopted random sampling procedures. The content analysis studies, despite their random sampling of the units of analysis, focused on individual incidents. In addition, the PSR dissolution and deterioration incidents examined in these studies varied significantly in nature. People rely on distinct cognitive schemas to interpret and react to these qualitatively different incidents. How people react to a celebrity's racist remarks may depend on their racial beliefs, while their reactions toward a sports star's use of performance enhancement drugs are associated with their thoughts about sports ethics. Furthermore, the conceptual and operational definitions of PSR are different across the studies. Most of them inherited Horton and Wohl's (1956) theorization and treated a PSR as a positive relationship. A few others, however, made a distinction between PSR strength and valence. In these studies, PSR was viewed as a neutral construct that can be either positive or negative. Since the measures of PSRs varied, they have captured different aspects of PSRs. Future researchers may continue to explore PSRs as a multidimensional concept and pinpoint the specific cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of PSR that are influenced by dissolution and deterioration incidents.

Third, the distinctions and connections between media characters and media figures need to be further explored. As reviewed above, people react differently to PSR dissolution and deterioration with these two types of personae (e.g., J. Cohen, 2003; Hu, 2016). The stages of fans' grief over Michael Jackson's death (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010) and John Snow's death (Daniel & Westerman, 2017) also showed noticeable differences. These findings echo the discussion about the authenticity of personae ranging from talk show hosts to cartoon characters (Giles, 2002). They may suggest the necessity to include such variables as perceived realism and context of a persona into the research framework of this domain. It is intriguing that perceived realism is positively associated with a PSR (R. Rubin & McHugh, 1987; R. B. Rubin & Rubin, 2001), but the research on whether PSRs with favorite media figures and characters differ from each other has yielded mixed findings (J. Cohen, 2003; Turner, 1993). One possible explanation is that perceived realism is a multidimensional construct (Hawkins, 1977; Potter, 1988), and the ways in which these dimensions are related to PSR are different. As to context, a media character is embedded within a certain fictional narrative world, such as the Central Perk coffee shop in *Friends*, Hogwarts School in *Harry Potter*, and Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings*. Therefore, a media character is closer than a media figure to the type of persona described by Horton and Wohl (1956):

> He has the peculiar virtue of being standardized according to the 'formula' for his character and performance which he and his managers have worked out and embodied in an appropriate 'production format.' Thus his character and pattern of action remain basically unchanged in a world of otherwise disturbing change. The persona is ordinarily predictable, and gives his adherents no unpleasant surprises. (p.217)

Joey is always silly, Hermione is always witty, and Gollum is always greedy. In contrast, a media figure, such as an actor, a sports star, or a news anchor, may appear in different programs, across different media, and with different identities (Giles, 2002). People may know multiple aspects of the figure, including profession, life, and hobbies. In contrast to a contextually embedded media character, a media figure is a cross-contextual persona. J. Cohen (2001) has reminded researchers that the combination of specific types of personae and contexts may influence people's reactions toward personae. Besides distinctions, the connections between media figures and characters need to be taken into consideration. Viewers' perceptions of an actor can be influenced by the traits of the fictional character played by the actor (Tal-Or & Papirman, 2007). Therefore, people may react differently to the transgressions of an actor who routinely plays positive characters and the transgressions of another actor who conventionally plays negative characters. For instance, the sexual misconduct accusations against the comedian Bill Cosby have aroused such vehement reactions from the public partly because people are fond of his iconic character

Dr. Cliff Huxtable, a loving husband and caring father in the sitcom *The Cosby Show* (Zernike, 2014).

Fourth, culture, including both the culture of audiences and the culture of media industry, should be placed in the future research agenda. Some researchers have proposed exploring culture in this line of research (e.g., J. Cohen, 2003), while some others have shown or implied the role of culture in their studies. Gender role expectations in American culture may contribute to boys' cognitive development and their breakup with female television characters when they grow older (Bond & Calvert, 2014). East Asian management companies, compared to their Western counterparts, have more control over celebrities' personal life, including dating and marriage (Hu et al., 2021). This direction is of particular importance considering the abundance of research revealing cultural differences in reactions to interpersonal relationship dissolution and deterioration and the scarcity of cross-cultural comparison studies in PSR research in general (Laham et al., 2010; Schmid & Klimmt, 2011). Furthermore, with the globalization of popular media culture, intercultural PSRs between personae and fans from different cultural contexts are common. On the one hand, researchers need to explore such cultural constructs as cultural dimensions involved in PSRs (Hofstede, 2011). On the other hand, researchers should avoid intuitive assumptions about culture differences because diverse cultures may share essential common elements in beliefs, values, and norms.

Fifth, "parasocial reunion" deserves research attention. Sometimes PSR dissolutions are not permanent because media figures and characters may later reunite with audiences. Michael Jordan's two-word fax, "I'm back"; the airing of *Friends: The Reunion* on HBO Max; the release of *Top Gun: Maverick* nearly four decades after the original movie; and gray-haired Han Solo in a new jacket hugging Princess Leia who changed her hairstyle in *The Force Awakens* all have aroused strong reactions from fans. The reactions to parasocial reunion, however, are not unanimously positive. Some fans send applause and cheers for their liked personae's returns, while some others may express concerns and even reluctance. Bostwick and Lookadoo (2017) examined Northeast Ohio residents' responses to the basketball star Lebron James's return to the Cleveland Cavaliers in 2014. Some of them viewed his return as a sign of the star's maturity and felt positive, while some others thought that it was meaningless and responded with negative emotions. Furthermore, those with stronger PSRs showed more understanding of his leaving for the Miami Heat in 2010 and exhibited more positive emotional reactions to his return. This study has provided preliminary but illuminating findings about parasocial reunion, which may mark the beginning of a new and promising thread of PSR research.

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PART III

PSR Across the Life Span

CHAPTER

7

Parasocial Relationships in Children

Nancy A. Jennings

Abstract

This chapter discusses how children develop parasocial relationships (PSRs) with media figures and the effects of these experiences within young and middle childhood. First, the chapter reviews research on the characteristics of children's PSRs: When and with whom do children form PSRs? What attracts children to particular media figures? How and when do children terminate their PSRs and move to other ones? Then, the chapter discusses educational and social–emotional effects that PSRs have on children, from examining the effect of educational programs such as *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* on emotional development to experimental research on how manipulation of a PSR with a novel cartoon character can promote academic gains.

Key Words: gender differences, identity, social learning, educational television, prosocial media effects

Introduction

"Sally, you've never seen a street like Sesame Street. Everything happens here. You're going to love it," says Gordon, a human character, as he walks on a set of an urban city street holding Sally's hand, a school-aged human girl, on the first episode of *Sesame Street* in 1969 (Hart et al., 1969). After an episode filled with introductions to various muppet and human characters and several segments both animated and live action, the episode closes with Gordon and Sally sitting on a stoop talking about their day on the street with Susan, Gordon's wife, and two muppet characters, Ernie and Bert. While Susan, Sally, Ernie, and Bert continue to chat, Gordon turns to the camera and says: "This is Sesame Street. We had a great time here" (Hart et al., 1969). While pointing to the camera, he continues: "You come back and join us anytime you want to. We're going to be here, right? Sally's going to be here, everybody's going to be here. Come back and join us" (Hart et al., 1969).

Meanwhile, college student Sonia Manzano caught a glimpse of *Sesame Street* on her college campus. Manzano, who would later join the cast as the human character Maria,

later recalled saying, “Hey! That’s my street!” upon seeing the stoop and the street that Gordon first introduced (Greene, 2019). As a child, Manzano said that she

> didn’t see the neighborhood that I lived in reflected on television or people, and I have to say that on some level I wondered where I was going to fit in to this society that didn’t see me. What my contribution was going to be. . . . I remembered myself watching *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver* and so I remembered myself doing that and I kept that sensibility in my heart while I was doing *Sesame Street* with the knowledge that there’s another kid out there looking for that sanctuary. (*PBS NewsHour*, 2015)

Little did Manzano know how many children she would reach with her 44-year career acting and writing for *Sesame Street*.

These two artifacts exemplify the key elements of parasocial interactions (PSIs) and parasocial relationships (PSRs) that the creation of children’s media by producers, writers, and actors facilitate. By speaking, looking, and pointing directly into the camera, Gordon simulates a conversational give and take with his audience through eye gaze, nonverbal movements, and verbal utterances. In this moment, Gordon and the viewers engage in a PSI wherein the audience shares a sense of mutual awareness and mutual attention to each other as if in a normal face-to-face encounter (Dibble et al., 2016; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). In these moments, the viewer can develop and form a PSR, a one-sided interpersonal relationship that resembles real-world relationships, particularly in terms of social support (Hartmann et al., 2008). As a child, Mazano sought refuge in television but did not find families or people that looked like her. When given the opportunity on *Sesame Street*, she aimed to fill that missing space from her childhood knowing that others were looking for people like themselves on TV. Through PSIs and PSRs, media figures build trust and create an environment where understanding and growth can occur both socially and cognitively and provide a place for children to find themselves on the screens they watch.

This chapter explores how young children (8 years and younger) engage with media characters and the mechanisms and implications of children’s identification with media figures as their PSRs strengthen. First, the chapter reviews research on the characteristics of children’s PSRs, including when and with whom children form PSRs, what attracts children to particular media figures, and how and when children terminate their PSRs and move to other ones. Then, the chapter discusses educational and social–emotional effects that PSRs have on children, from examining the effect of educational programs such as *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood* (DTN) on emotional development (Rasmussen et al., 2016) to experimental research on how manipulation of a PSR with a novel cartoon character can promote academic gains (Howard Gola et al., 2013). First, attention should be given to the primary elements that lead to the formation of PSRs in young children.

Building Blocks of Young Children's PSRs

Bond and Calvert (2014a) identified three primary dimensions of PSR in preschool children: (1) attachment, (2) character personification of humanlike needs, and (3) social realism (Bond & Calvert, 2014a; Richards & Calvert, 2017). *Attachment* refers to children's sense of comfort and security obtained by proximity to others and begins during infancy with their attachment to their mother (Bowlby, 1969). Parents of preschoolers observed that media figures make their child feel comfortable and safe, and that the voice of the media figure soothes their child for attachment (Bond & Calvert, 2014a). Moreover, when asked directly, preschoolers' attachment and friendship with media figures were indicated by their judgment of characters to be trustworthy, to be a friend, to make the child feel safe, and if the character was identified as cute (Richards & Calvert, 2017). *Character personification* is important for development of attachment. Personification suggests that person-like qualities and characteristics can be assigned to media characters (Bond & Calvert, 2014a). Parents of preschoolers indicated that their child thinks that the media figure has thoughts and emotions, needs, and wants. Additionally, parents indicated their child trusts and treats the media figure as a friend, and that their child gets sad when the media figure gets sad or makes a mistake (Bond & Calvert, 2014a). Preschoolers directly report that they think media figures exhibit humanlike needs of hunger and sleep, and the child also feels sad when the character makes a mistake (Richards & Calvert, 2017).

Having humanlike needs is related to the third dimension of *social realism*. When a character is perceived to be able to exist in the real world, that character embodies social realism. Parents of preschoolers indicate that their child knows that the media figure is imaginary or real, and when the character performs a behavior on screen (e.g., dancing or singing), the child believes that the character is performing the behavior in real life (Bond & Calvert, 2014a). Similarly, preschoolers label characters as real or pretend (Richards & Calvert, 2017). These labels are particularly relevant when considering children's understanding of media representations. Media figures may be shown as real people such as show hosts or presenters, while other figures may be fictional creations portrayed by actors and, particularly in the case of children's media, through animation or puppetry. Younger children have greater difficulty distinguishing between what is real and unreal (Wright et al., 1994). As such, younger children may perceive animated characters, muppets, and media figures as real, making them more susceptible to making connections with perceived real figures.

Additionally, gender seems to play an important role in PSRs. Preschool boys chose same-sex characters as their favorite more frequently than did girls, and girls reported a stronger desire to be like their favorite character than did boys (Wilson & Drogos, 2007). The boys' preference for a same-sex character continues later into childhood as demonstrated in a sample of children aged 7–12 (Hoffner, 1996). However, although girls are as likely to choose a favorite character of the opposite sex, they may still shape deeper PSRs with same-sex characters. For instance, Calvert and her colleagues (2007)

found that girls identified with the Hispanic female character (Dora) more than boys and benefited more than boys from interactions with Dora. As such, gender of both the child and the character seems to have implications on preschool PSRs, particularly for girls.

Age and gender also play a role in attraction to different character traits. A seminal research study with children aged 7–12 years assessed their perceptions of five personal traits associated with characters: attractiveness, strength, humor, intelligence, and social behavior (Hoffner, 1996). Gender differences were noted regarding preferences for characters, such that for favorite male characters, attractiveness and intelligence of the character predicted PSI for both girls and boys. Strength was also an important predictor of PSI of male characters, but for boys only. However, for favorite female characters, attractiveness was the only predictor of PSI for girls (Hoffner, 1996). In the development of the PSR model with parents of younger children (aged 6 months to 8 years), character traits such those proposed by Hoffner (1996) related to physical attraction did not lead to a valid construct; therefore, attraction was dropped from the analysis. However, in later work involving a recontact of parents of the young children in previous studies (Bond & Calvert, 2014a; Richards & Calvert, 2016), Aguiar et al. (2019b) discovered through parent reports that in children aged 6 to 8 years, character qualities emerged as a new dimension of PSRs, specifically smart, attractive, strong, and nice. Additionally, scores for character traits were significantly higher for girls than boys (Aguiar et al., 2019b). As such, gender continues to play a role in PSR for young children.

PSRs, Friendship, and Identity

Through the lens of uses and gratifications theory, Giles (2002) described two primary functions of parasocial media use: companionship and personal identity. Both of these are particularly relevant for young children, particularly considering the role of PSRs in socialization and education. Children develop friendships with media figures, and children learn about their own identity and the identity of others through their engagement with media characters.

PSRs and Friendship

A PSR built with an on-screen media figure can lead to a sense of friendship and companionship. PSRs are constructed similarly to the way real-life relationships are made, both actively (e.g., talking about characters with other real-life people) and passively by observing the on-screen personality and learning about their thoughts, behaviors, and values (Perse & Rubin, 1989). In shows for young children, this aspect is particularly important, and often PSI is facilitated by incorporating specific program features that invite the viewer into a relationship with the media figure. For example, Perse and Rubin (1989) submitted that perceived self-disclosure through PSI with the character may lead to reduced uncertainty, making the character's behaviors more predictable, and thereby enhancing a sense

of intimacy with the character. Preschoolers have been observed responding to PSI from media characters through verbal and nonverbal behaviors. For example, while watching *Blue's Clues*, children made various verbalizations about the show, including answering questions asked by the characters (e.g., "Steve, the clue is on the cow!"), making general comments about the program (e.g., "I have a puppy, too"), and other verbalization, such as singing and laughing (Crawley et al., 1999). Children also enacted nonverbal behaviors such as nodding their heads or pointing to the screen in response to the characters or actions on the screen and imitating the behaviors seen (Crawley et al., 1999). Jennings et al. (2009) noted similar behaviors when preschool-aged children watched *Between the Lions*, a show focused on teaching literacy skills. Children sang along with the theme song, listened intently, clapped, laughed at jokes made by the characters, and tried to pronounce words on screen before the word was announced (Jennings et al., 2009). Tweens reflecting on their preschool viewing of programs like *Dora the Explorer*, which also incorporated PSIs, recalled verbally responding to PSI cues from the characters and expressed a sense of perceived connection and community with the characters gained through this engagement (Jennings, 2014). For example, one tween girl recalled that after uttering a response to Dora's question, she reported: "I believed that I was helping her, that I was just being there with her like her friend" (Jennings, 2014, p. 83). These examples demonstrate that PSI cues built into the program can facilitate and maintain a sense of parasocial friendship and connection between the viewer and media figures.

Once the invitation to meet the characters is accepted by the young viewer, the PSR is built through repeated viewing and continued simulated interactions. In this way, one mechanism by which PSRs grow, similarly to in-person social relationships, is through uncertainty reduction, such that relationships develop as people learn more about each other and can predict the other's behavior (Perse & Rubin, 1989; also see Chapter 5 for review of models of PSR development). This is particularly important for children on a number of levels. First, in terms of viewing behaviors, young children often watch the same television show or film over and over again, particularly once technologies such as VCRs allowed for repeated viewing (Mares, 1998; Skouteris & Kelly, 2006). Repeated viewing has implications for a variety of outcomes, but the fundamental influence of repetition is learning—learning of people, behavior, settings, and content. As it relates to PSR, with each viewing, the child's knowledge about the on-screen personality grows and is reinforced through repeated viewings, thereby increasing the predictability and stability of that character's personality. This character knowledge building enhances familiarity with the media figure, which has implications for children's learning of behavior and content as exhibited by this familiar character. Second, unlike in person interactions with others, on-screen characters and personalities are always the same in prerecorded shows. They behave the same way the first time the child sees the show and the next time, and the next. Unlike in person interactions, the on-screen character is consistently reducing uncertainty regarding what to expect from encounters. Depending on different circumstances, people in

face-to-face interactions may respond differently, but that is not the case with the stable, prerecorded on-screen character.

Parasocial interactions and relationships have been a key element of children's programming from the very beginning. Hosted by "Big Brother" Bob Emery, the classic 1950s television program *Small Fry Club* opened with Emery singing the program's theme song on his ukulele while looking at the television camera and speaking directly to his audience. He offered to send his viewers the show's coloring book and asked them to send pictures and letters to the show's New York City address (Paley Center for Media, 2017). Shows for children, particularly preschool children, continue to be a place where PSIs are directly incorporated into the show, often as a teaching technique. *Romper Room*, developed by Bert and Nancy Claster, simulated a televised kindergarten classroom complete with a teacher who interacted directly with the viewing audience. One technique the teacher used was her "Magic Mirror," in which the host teacher would hold an empty hand-mirror frame in front of her face and looking into the camera, she would say, "I see Mary and Bobby, and Tommy, and Donnie . . ." which were names of the show's fans who had sent in fan mail to the show (Hollis, 2001, p. 15). In its debut episode, *Sesame Street* used PSIs and PSRs in a variety of ways to bring the child viewing audience into the show to enhance learning and build a comforting space for children to experience. PSIs took a new step in the 1990s, beginning with the success of *Blue's Clues*, in which "viewer as protagonist" (Moore, 1998) became a unique trendsetter with PSIs at the core of the narrative development. This was a critical element to the success of *Blue's Clues* and set the stage for the development of other shows, such as *Dora the Explorer*, *Go! Diego! Go!*, and later *Super WHY!* and *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*, where child viewer responses seemingly direct the show.

PSRs and Identity Construction

Parasocial media use also has implications for identity construction, a second function of PSRs (Giles, 2002). Identity has been defined by different levels of self-representation: (1) individual (differentiated, personal self-concept), (2) relational (self-concept formed by connections and the relational roles with others), and (3) collective (membership within a large group or social category) (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Each of these levels combine to help us create our narrative identity—an "internalized and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to make sense and meaning out of his or her life" (McAdams, 2011, p. 99). As a theoretical lens, social identity theory (SIT) integrates these levels and narratives through establishment of social group identity. As such, SIT posits that social groups are formed when two or more individuals "perceive themselves to be members of the same social category" and "act as a group" based on this perception (Turner, 2010, p. 15). Moreover, social identification is described as a "process of locating oneself, or another person, within a system of social categorizations . . . to define him- or herself and others" (Turner, 2010, pp. 17–18). While much of the research

on SIT focuses on adults, questions have been raised whether SIT can be experienced by and applied to children.

Identity work has most often been associated with adolescence (Strasburger et al., 2009). However, grounded in SIT, scholars have developed and tested theories regarding the *development* of social identity from early childhood such as the developmental intergroup theory (DIT; Bigler & Liben, 2006). Through DIT, Bigler and Liben (2006) combined SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), self-categorization theories (Turner et al., 1987), and Piaget's cognitive-developmental theory to identify and describe four core processes of DIT. As with other developmental theorists, Bigler and Liben (2006) submitted that children seek structure to build their knowledge of the world and look for meaningful clues or features to differentiate the many objects and persons they encounter. Through DIT, children engage in four core processes with the people in their lives: (1) establishing person attribute salience or meaning, (2) categorizing of individuals along the salient attributes, (3) developing stereotypes and prejudices about the salient social groups, and (4) applying these stereotype filters to others when they are encountered. For people, perceptually salient or meaningful physical features of individuals that typically denote categories of race (skin tone) and gender (facial hair) become the first tools for children to categorize individuals into groups. Another salient factor of social groups relates to their size, such that in unequal groups, social categories become more noticeable and relevant. As children mature, their language skills develop, and they begin to learn and use labels or words that become associated with social groups.

Furthermore, factors including essentialism, ingroup bias, explicit attributions, and implicit attributions affect the development of stereotypes and prejudices (Bigler & Liben, 2006). Bigler and Liben (2006) argued that children tend to believe that members of a group or category that share perceptual attributes (e.g., skin tone) also share nonperceptual attributes (e.g., religious beliefs) and thus essentialize group members and group membership, treating all these attributes as normal markers of groups. Relatedly, children also have a tendency to have an affinity to groups in which they find themselves as members (ingroup bias), which can be reinforced through explicit (verbal) and implicit (nonverbal) attributions of both ingroup and outgroup members (Bigler & Liben, 2006). These lessons about group members become internalized and normalized by socializing agents, including parents, peers, and media.

Media depictions, then, play a part in the categorization and learning of social groups on a number of levels. First, the perceptually salient physical features of characters are recognized on screen as well as in real life (Bandura, 2008). Second, children notice the unequal distribution of depictions of people in social groups in the media stories they see, hear, and play. This is particularly problematic when considering the lack of diversity in children's programs (Aladé et al., 2021; Götz et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2010). In a content analysis of 4,596 children's television shows from around the world, most characters in the shows were White (68%), male (62%) youth (69% children or adolescents) (Götz et

al., 2018). Similarly, an analysis of top-grossing box office G-rated films in the United States and Canada revealed that 72% of the characters were male, and 85.5% were White (Smith et al., 2010). In a recent analysis of children's science television programs, Aladé and her colleagues (2021) discovered an overrepresentation of racially ambiguous characters with either undefined skin tones or nonhuman skin tones, such as purple and green for human characters that are animated or puppets/muppets. This undefined or nonhuman skin tone may contribute to the construction of a hybrid ethnic child, which may be othering rather than inclusive. Third, the labels used within the media content and the attributes then associated with social groups are taught and often reinforced to societal norms within media (Bandura, 2008; Gerbner et al., 2002). As such, media play a role in children's developing socialization within groups and their own self-identity through the PSRs shared with media characters.

Educational and Social–Emotional Effects of PSRs With Young Children

Given the amount of PSI cues present in programming for young children, it should come as no surprise that the vast majority of research on children's PSIs and PSRs has been conducted with children (and their parents) younger than 8 years. Two primary areas of focus for children in this age group has been on the educational and social–emotional effects of PSR through children's media. Both of these areas are important and should be grounded in Fisch's capacity model theory (2000) as a key mechanism to explain the role of PSRs in learning.

Fisch's capacity model (2000) serves as a model with governing principles to explain how children learn from educational content on television. The model has three basic elements: (1) processing demands of the narrative, (2) processing demands of the educational content, and (3) the distance between the narrative and the educational content. The model posits that there are limited working memory resources available to process both the narrative and the educational content. Thus, learning is strengthened when the processes are complementary of each other rather than competitive, that is, when the distance between the narrative and the educational content is small. There are a number of factors that can decrease different processing demands. One of them, according to Fisch (2000), is viewers' prior knowledge of characters that decreases demands for the processing of the narrative, thus making more room for the processing of the educational content associated with that character. As such, PSRs with characters should decrease demand for understanding the narrative and allow for a greater allocation of resources to comprehend educational lessons. These lessons come in at least two forms: (1) academic gains and (2) social–emotional gains.

PSRs and Academic Gains

One of the most commonly reported reasons that parents allow children 8 years and younger to spend time with media is because "they learn things from it" (Rideout &

Robb, 2020). Nearly three fourths (72%) of parents surveyed indicated that their child's media use mostly helps their child's learning (Rideout & Robb, 2020). Indeed, researchers have well documented the educational benefits of media engagement, and there are several elements that have an impact on academic gains in terms of both the content and the viewer (Piotrowski, 2018; Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2018). One of these elements centers on children's relationships and familiarity with characters.

Research has demonstrated that even toddlers establish and can benefit from PSRs with media characters on television. For example, Lauricella et al. (2011) conducted a series of experiments examining learning of seriation skills in 21-month-old toddlers. Seriation skills constitute a foundational concept for logical–mathematical thinking, and its assessment serves as a key indicator of successful acquisition of academic knowledge that develops during early childhood and beyond. In one experiment comparing learning of a seriation sequencing task from a familiar character (Elmo from *Sesame Street*) with an unfamiliar character (DoDo from a famous Taiwanese children's television show), PSRs with the character played a key factor in how well children learned seriation from the on-screen character. Results indicated that children who watched Elmo (a socially meaningful and familiar character with which children had a PSR) outperformed those who viewed DoDo, suggesting that an emotional attachment with the characters can have a positive impact on learning (Lauricella et al., 2011). Another experiment with DoDo provided further evidence of the importance of PSRs in learning by manipulating young children's familiarity with DoDo. In this experiment, 18-month-old toddlers were given 3 months to play with a plush toy of DoDo and watch DoDo videos. While the scholars contend that 3 months may not have been long enough to form a deep relationship for the toddlers, this study did demonstrate the ability of play with toys to increase familiarity and subsequent PSRs with characters (Lauricella et al., 2011). Results indicated that toddlers who nurtured a relationship with the character through play subsequently benefited more from the instructional video starring that character. These children obtained higher seriation scores, thus demonstrating a better ability to transfer learning from a two-dimensional screen experience to a three-dimensional living space (Howard Gola et al., 2013).

Interestingly, however, PSRs do not bias judgments of source credibility (Richards & Calvert, 2015). In this series of experiments, 24-month- and 32-month-old children played an app on a touchscreen tablet (iPad). In this game, children were asked to pick the correct word for different kinds of fruit that were labeled correctly or incorrectly either by DoDo (unfamiliar character) or Elmo (familiar character). Then, children were presented with novel fruit and the same characters suggested different labels for them. In this case, children did not let the familiarity or PSR with the character cloud their judgment on which character held the correct label. Rather, they used the character's earlier accuracy to assess source credibility and decide which character to rely on for making the word choice in the novel task. This suggests that when it comes to touchscreen technology and

accuracy judgments, PSRs may play less of an important role in an interactive setting than in observed learning from television. Nonetheless, PSRs can still be important in this context, serving as a motivating factor for children to play educational games that feature familiar characters on touchscreen devices.

As young children mature into preschoolers, additional research regarding the impact of PSRs and PSIs on learning continues. Early research on Nick Jr.'s *Blue's Clues* found that with repeated exposure to the program, children's verbal and nonverbal interactions with the educational portions of the program increased, as did their comprehension and their application of problem-solving strategies (Crawley et al., 1999). Similarly, experimental research on Nick Jr.'s show *Dora the Explorer* found that preschoolers who responded verbally and physically to Dora's requests learned more about the plot-related material than those who did not interact (Calvert et al., 2007). Interestingly, Piotrowski (2014) found that PSIs alone did not seem to help children learn the educational content of the program, except in situations where children were familiar (i.e., had a PSR) with the characters. Moreover, trust of characters as a credible source of information has been found to be a contributing factor to comprehension and transfer of knowledge from television characters in preschoolers (Schlesinger et al., 2016). Combined, this research suggests that while PSIs alone may not lead to higher learning outcomes, they may help to familiarize the viewer with the character and the learning expectations within the show and increase engagement with the character and subsequent educational content. The PSRs established with familiar characters have learning implications in terms of increased interaction with characters and content and reduced cognitive demands of the narrative to shorten the distance to the educational content (Fisch, 2000). Additionally, the familiarization of characters may encourage repeated viewing, which also has educational benefits. As a result, trusted characters and familiar characters are also important for positive academic outcomes for young viewers.

PSRs and Social–Emotional Gains

Embedded in the educational implications of PSRs with young children is the social–emotional learning that children undertake from and with media figures. In the literature and research on children's media, social–emotional lessons are often referred to as prosocial content—that is, lessons that model and teach prosocial behaviors, including (1) positive interactions (e.g., peaceful conflict resolution and cooperative play), (2) physical and verbal aggression reduction, (3) altruism (e.g., sharing, helping, and comforting), and (4) stereotype reduction (depictions that counter stereotypes) (Mares et al., 2011; Mares & Woodard, 2005).

In pursuit of education, social–emotional skills and knowledge can take second stage to cognitive learning and academic gains. However, it should be noted that social–emotional learning is also a learning outcome that can have implications for academic gains and is experiencing a resurgence in educational settings (Dresser, 2013). The Federal

Communications Commission (FCC), the agency that oversees educational television in the United States, specifically called out social–emotional learning as fulfilling the obligations of mandated requirements of educational programming (Kunkel, 1998). Specifically, the FCC defined educational programming as content "that furthers the positive development of the child in any respect, including the child's cognitive/intellectual or emotional/social needs" (FCC, 1991, p. 2111). Interestingly, much of the educational programming on commercial broadcast stations for children has been identified as featuring social–emotional lessons (67%), with less than a third (30%) focused on cognitive–intellectual lessons (Wilson et al., 2008). These social–emotional episodes mostly focused on lessons concerning positive interaction with others (26%), self-esteem (18%), or self-restraint (12%) (Wilson et al., 2008).

Moreover, it is important to note that in a meta-analysis of 34 studies of prosocial effects of television, prosocial effects were strongest in shows that contained explicit modeling of prosocial behavior, specifically for altruism, and that the greatest impact of prosocial television was for children 7 years and younger (Mares & Woodard, 2005). As such, characters make a difference in teaching of prosocial behaviors, particularly for younger children, making room again to consider the PSRs young children form with media characters as a mechanism for prosocial or social–emotional learning.

While much of the experimental research on prosocial effects was conducted in the 1970s (Mares et al., 2011), new research on contemporary programs continues to reveal the value and importance of social–emotional and prosocial learning from children's media. Summative research on PBS's *Dragon Tales*, the most frequently mentioned lesson learned from *Dragon Tales* was how to get along with other people (friends and siblings in particular) with a particular emphasis on sharing and that the characters their child mentioned most often were the young dragon characters (Rust, 2001). Parents who co-viewed *Dragon Tales* with their children were more likely to talk about issues of sharing and selflessness than parents who co-viewed other programs (Rust, 2001). Similarly, in a study on PBS's (DTN), active mediation was associated with higher levels of empathy, self-efficacy, and emotion recognition, particularly for younger children (ages 4 years and younger) and children from lower income households (Rasmussen et al., 2016). Interestingly, active mediation was measured with a 16-question scale with several mentions of relating to characters within the program, including repeating dialogue of the characters, parental encouragement of imitation of character behavior, relating character experience to their child's experience, and helping their child understand the emotions of the characters on the program (Rasmussen et al., 2016). As such, through active mediation, parents may be assisting in children's PSR formation with characters and emphasizing and reinforcing the prosocial lessons and behaviors associated with positive characters. Moreover, when including mobile app play with DTN, children used the emotion regulation strategies taught in the show more frequently than those children who did not watch the show or play with the associated app, and 3- and 4-year-olds had higher levels of emotion

knowledge (Rasmussen et al., 2019). This is particularly compelling since the main characters in DTN, specifically Daniel Tiger himself, are anthropomorphic characters, similar to the most frequently mentioned characters in *Dragon Tales*. Rasmussen et al. (2019) submitted that because Daniel is a socially meaningful character (Lauricella et al., 2011) with implications of PSRs with children that this may overcome barriers associated with better learning from human characters then nonhuman characters. As such, nonhuman characters, then, can have an impact on not only academic or cognitive gains, but also social-emotional gains.

Growing Up and Breaking Up

As young children grow up, they tend to begin to watch other shows and leave their preschool shows and characters behind. As such, they experience what is known as parasocial breakup (PSB) or a dissolution of a PSR (Cohen, 2003; see Chapter 6). Often, this breakup usually occurs for adults when a character or actor dies or a show ends or is cancelled. However, for children, this breakup is more likely to occur as their interests move from their favorite preschool shows to more age-appropriate programming as they grow older. School-aged children become "too old" to watch preschool shows, and they begin to develop new relationships with other characters and celebrities. Rosaen and Dibble (2008) have also found that younger children have stronger PSRs with their favorite characters than older children, suggesting implications for shifts in emotional connections with media figures with age may be more strongly felt for younger children than older children. Parents reported that their preschool age children experienced a breakup when they became interested in a new character or show from another television show or through habituation; that is, they lose interest in a character after overexposure to the same content through repeated viewing (Bond & Calvert, 2014b). According to the parents, preschoolers experienced PSB on average at the age of 3 years.

Longitudinal research with parents of young children recontacted after 3 years (Bond & Calvert, 2014a; Richards & Calvert, 2016) provided detailed results regarding PSB for young children (Aguiar et al., 2019a, 2019b). Results indicated that the vast majority of children (89%) had changed their favorite media character from the time of the initial contact (Aguiar et al., 2019b). Interestingly, 50.7% of parents of young children indicated that their child had specifically experienced a PSB (Aguiar et al., 2019a). Moreover, girls were more likely to experience a PSB and to form new PSRs with different media characters, and 26% of the children (mostly girls) had stopped liking Dora the Explorer, the most commonly reported favorite character by these same young children 3 years earlier (Aguiar et al., 2019a).

Parents most often (63.8%) reported that the reason for the breakup was that the child outgrew their favorite characters and shows. The more children considered their former favorites as shows for babies, the less positively they felt about these characters (Aguiar et al., 2019a). Additionally, gender-role socialization appears to play an increasingly notable

role with age, as seen in the children's selection of their new favorite characters. As the children move to their next PSR, new favorite characters become more gender-stereotype conforming. That is, the masculinity of boys' favorite characters and the femininity of girls' favorite characters increased as the children age, following each PSB (Aguiar et al., 2019a; Bond & Calvert, 2014b). Finally, although not generalizable, the tween girls who had PSRs with preschool characters had regained a fond memory of them in their tweenhood (Jennings, 2014). Together, this suggests that even in early childhood, favorite characters and shows can be quickly outgrown, that PSRs with media characters can change over time, and that it may be possible for PSRs to be rekindled as young children grow and develop.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Young children grow up in a parasocial world, spending screen time with media characters on average 2½ hours a day (Rideout & Robb, 2020), sleeping on sheets with their favorite characters, playing with plush toys and action figures of media characters, and wearing them on their everyday and dress-up/pretend clothes. They develop relationships with television and movie characters both animated and live action and learn cognitive, social–emotional, and life skills from them as well. Children can see themselves in media characters, which can shape their own identity and their knowledge about others, and children can outgrow their preschool media friends and have them replaced by a newer media friend.

PSRs, PSIs, and Identity

Future research needs to continue to investigate the implications of PSR and PSI on children's understanding of the world, particularly in association with identity. So little is known about the impact of media depictions on children's identity, particularly on racial identity (Mares et al., 2015; also see Chapter 18). Different approaches have been taken over the years in programs for young children regarding race. For example, *Sesame Street* has taken a subtle approach by showing a racially integrated street. While Manzano reported that she "never saw these cheerful, attractive, Black, friendly people in this environment that was recognizable to me, with the stoop and the tenement doors" (*PBS NewsHour*, 2015), it is unclear if the subtle approach is the best approach to soothe race relations. Moreover, as Aladé and her colleagues (2021) noted, it is unclear if these racially ambiguous characters provide a space for children of different races to project their own race or if this continues to other their own identity and reinforce ingroups and outgroups.

Methodological Advances

Another area of growth in this field involves continued development of measures of PSI and PSR with young children. Working with this population is particularly tricky, since young children are developing language and cognitive skills, rendering it problematic to rely on

verbal self-report data such as interviews or scales (Lemish, 2018). Thus, some scholars have turned to parents to learn more about how they perceive their child's PSRs with characters (Aguiar et al., 2019b; Bond & Calvert, 2014a). This approach is also not without limitations since these data represent parents' judgments and may not be a valid representation of the children's actual psychological experiences (see Chapter 4 for discussion of PSR/PSI measurement validity). Indeed, when Richards and Calvert (2016) compared parent and child reports, they found that when asked to identify the child's favorite character, only about one third of the parents listed the same character that their child chose. One is left wondering: If parents cannot accurately identify their child's favorite character, how can they be trusted with inferring internal psychological processes such as PSRs?

Although time consuming, observations of children's responses to assess PSI and PSR (Crawley et al., 1999; Jennings et al., 2009) could offer an alternative method of gaining more direct information from the child. However, observations also have limitations, including interpretation of child responses (the smile or laughter can be observed, but why it happened may not be obtainable) and data collection including privacy issues such as recording of young children, which involves personally identifying markers through images. Visual orientation (eyes on screen) has been used as an indicator of attention (Crawley et al., 1999), which lends itself to considering uses of eye-tracking methods to more closely explore fixation on specific elements of the screen such as characters and to assess eye contact with characters. Using eye tracking with 3- to 5-year-old children while watching *Sesame Street*, Flynn and her colleagues (2019) discovered that children fixated on characters, both people and muppets, twice as long as they looked at objects, and attended to on-screen conversations more than conversations that were cut between screens. With additional eye-tracking studies, more can be learned about eye contact with characters, particularly those characters speaking to the screen, since eye contact is a key element of relationship building (Jongerius et al., 2020). Moreover, who is fixated on and for how long can be more clearly assessed with eye tracking and could be a very nuanced way to learn more about children's PSIs and PSRs with characters having different traits and behaviors.

Despite these uncertainties, one thing is clear: Media characters can provide companionship and comfort for young children. They can ignite curiosity and altruistic actions and encourage friendly play and cognitive growth. Sonia Manzano described this in a reflection on her work with *Sesame Street*: "I found comfort in television (as a child) and that I ended up providing comfort or wanting to provide comfort for children who are watching television" (*PBS NewsHour*, 2015). In a world of uncertainties, comfort in a parasocial world can make all the difference.

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CHAPTER

8 PSRs in Adolescence

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Abstract

Adolescence is a critical developmental moment for humans. Biologically and socially, the adolescents' worlds are shifting drastically, and, as a result, their relationships to media figures must shift as well. This chapter examines the unique developmental role that media personalities play in adolescence. The chapter begins by discussing the characteristics of parasocial relationships in this age group—how relationships with celebrities fit within the adolescents' social circle more broadly, alongside their peers, parents, and family, in developing the adolescents' identity. These parasocial experiences offer youth aspirational role models, leading to various effects, ranging from career aspirations to body image perceptions. Moreover, romantic parasocial experiences constitute important sexual/romantic experimentation that can shape their romantic schemas and relational expectations.

Key Words: adolescence, romantic parasocial relationships, socialization, LGB, compensation

Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental moment for humans. Biologically and socially, the adolescents' worlds are shifting drastically, and, as a result, their relationships to media figures must shift as well. Parasocial relationships (PSRs), unidirectional and mediated imagined relationships with media figures, play an important role during this time of transition (Tukachinsky Forster, 2021). Parasocial attachments to media figures in adolescence are a normative, common experience, and adolescents use these attachments to fulfill a variety of developmental goals (Giles, 2002). The adolescent experience of parasocial attachments differs from both childhood imaginative activities in social environments and adult parasocial experiences (Gleason et al., 2020).

While the social focus of childhood PSRs is to understand friendship and other primary relationships, adolescents turn inward, using PSRs to better understand themselves and their place in the world (Gleason et al., 2020). Although still engaging in the shared

developmental task of relational formation, adolescents' parasocial experiences tend to be about the self as well as the other (Hoffner, 2008; Perse & Rubin, 1989). Adolescents also tend to choose more realistic targets for their parasocial attachments, meaning they are generally attracted to fewer fictional or animated characters compared with younger children (Roseaen & Dibble, 2008). This chapter provides an overview of adolescence as a developmental process and why parasocial experience might be especially salient and influential during this process, followed by a detailed examination of the characteristics of adolescent parasocial experiences, their functions, and their impacts on socialization and development.

The Adolescent Context

Adolescents experience simultaneous shifts in their individual biology and in the shape of their social worlds. Biologically, there are visible physical changes, such as the development of secondary sex characteristics, along with hormonal and neurological changes (Blakemore, 2012). These changes, in aggregate, lead adolescents to prioritize social relationships, increase their tolerance for risk, and develop an increasingly clear sense of self (Blakemore, 2012). The visible physical changes to adolescents during puberty impact how an adolescent sees their body and identity while also influencing the way the adolescent is treated by others (Blakemore, 2012). The hormones of puberty activate the social centers of the brain (mPFC, pSTS, and ATC[1]), heightening the importance of and attention to social relationships (Blakemore, 2012; Brizendine, 2006). This activation of a need for shared social experiences occurs for most adolescents but maybe especially salient to adolescent girls when combined with gender socialization (Brizendine, 2006). This attention to social situations and needs is combined with an increase in responsiveness to incentives and rewards (Casey et al., 2008). Adolescents are biologically predisposed to seek out novelty and sensation and to be highly aware of social situations and contexts (Casey et al., 2008).

Socially, the bodily changes associated with puberty are mirrored in shifts in an adolescents' social ecosystem. Adolescence is a pivotal moment for exploring, testing, and determining adult identities. Adolescents are moving from a social world defined by and centered on their parents and family to a peer-centered social world (Greene & Adams-Price, 1990). During this time, same-gender friends tend to replace parents as primary sources of socialization, learning, and identity (Bond, 2018). This moment is precarious and risky, the equivalent of a bird's first steps out of a nest and into the larger world. Adolescents are sensitive to rejection (especially socially) and feel a strong need for ontological security and social affinity (Cohen & Perse, 2003) as they attend to the developmental tasks ahead. These tasks, as identified by Erikson (1968), include developing concrete identities, transforming family and peer relationships, developing sexuality, and beginning the path toward an adult career.

The Importance of Parasocial Attachments in Adolescence

Although parasocial experiences during adolescence are often dismissed as trivial or as pathological and dangerous (for review, see, Erickson et al., 2018; Tukachinsky Forster, 2021), there is limited evidence in support of this stance (Giles & Maltby, 2004).[2] In fact, the vast majority of research on adolescent PSRs suggests that these are normal social experiences grounded in fulfilling specific needs (for review, see Giles, 2002). In fact, the unique combination of social and biological shifts in this age group renders parasocial experiences in adolescence particularly salient (Erickson et al., 2018).

First, from a social perspective, media are important socialization agents for adolescents (Ward, 2003), and attachments to media figures play a central role in this process (Giles, 2002). Adolescents use media, along with other socialization agents, to safely explore adulthood, and the influence of media is likely increased by the fact that media are generally self-selected, giving the adolescent a sense of control of their own socialization (Arnett, 1995; Brown et al., 1993). Media are ubiquitous and popular in peer groups and, as such, may serve as a "super peer" for adolescents (Brown et al., 2005).

Second, intense PSRs often occur during major transitional moments at different points in audience members' lives, for instance during adjustment in adulthood to becoming a new mother or after losing a spouse (Tukachinsky Forster, 2021). Similarly, adolescence is a pivotal moment of change. PSRs during this time serve a crucial role in helping adolescents to achieve developmental tasks, such as the development of self-concept and exploration of identity (Boon & Lomore, 2001; Stever, 2020). Media can take over parental roles as parents are de-idealized, and media figures can provide stable peer relationships during the transition to a more peer-centered social world (Giles & Maltby, 2004).

Third, PSRs can provide adolescents with a safe space for experimentation where the benefits of interpersonal relationships are maximized and the risks minimized (Adam & Sizemore, 2013). Engaging in PSRs increases an adolescent's control of their self-socialization; the viewer can terminate or change the relationship at any time without consequences (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Schiappa et al., 2007). In a PSR, an adolescent can remain a stranger to the object of their attachment, allowing for safe identity exploration (Giles, 2002). For all of these reasons, the attention to media, the time of transition, and the need for a sense of social security with minimal risk, PSRs in adolescents are essential to development and represent a unique form of parasocial experience.

Parasocial Interactions and Parasocial Relationships

Characteristics of Parasocial Experiences in Adolescence

Parasocial relationships in adolescence largely resemble interpersonal relationships and friendships (Gleason et al., 2017; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). The relationships are built on many of the same qualities as real-life friendships, including personality, appearance, and social behavior (Hoffner, 2008; Perse & Rubin, 1989), and involve similar

characteristics. Both PSRs and friendships are voluntary and personal, provide companionship, rely on self-disclosure and expressions of affection, and follow predictable, but variable, progressions (Perse & Rubin, 1989; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). Interpersonal relationships can also influence PSR experiences (Giles, 2002).

As in interpersonal relationships, PSRs involve emotional, cognitive, fantasy, and behavioral elements. PSRs in adolescence are emotionally intense and involve connection and emotional response to a media figure (Gleason et al., 2020; Klimmt et al., 2006). Adolescents empathize with the emotions of a media figure and feel what they believe that person is feeling (Klimmt et al., 2006). As in interpersonal relationships, fans feel empathy toward those with whom they perceive an emotional connection. Fans also experience emotions related to their specific relationship with the media figure, perhaps excitement at being able to see them soon on a favorite show or sadness when they do not live up to relationship expectations (Erickson et al., 2018).

Cognitively, the experience of a PSR is made up of attention allocation, script and schema development, and making connections (Klimmt et al., 2006). Adolescents also make cognitive assessments of their favorite media figures based on evaluation and comparison as they seek to understand the behaviors of the media figure and anticipate their next moves (Erickson et al., 2018). These assessments can involve examination of shared traits, consideration of how best to support the media figure, and information seeking to reduce uncertainty (Erickson et al., 2018). PSRs can also influence thoughts related to the interpretation of media texts (Cohen, 2002).

The unidirectional nature of PSRs requires a significant amount of fantasy on the part of the viewer. Adolescents engage with an idealized version of the media figure with whom they perceive a relationship and the fantasized version of that figure is likely more salient to the adolescent than the actual representation of the media figure in popular culture (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990). Additionally, beyond projecting an idealized version of a media figure in the relationship, adolescents also imagine an idealized version of themselves in order to meet personal needs (Erickson et al., 2018; Theran et al., 2010). Fans may also imagine or fantasize about a media persona, imagining possible interactions or elements of the media figure's life (Erickson et al., 2018). These fantasies are not limited to PSRs though. Imagination and fantasy are central to all social interactions, another way in which PSRs are similar to interpersonal relationships (Giles, 2002).

Finally, PSRs in adolescence involve specific behaviors. PSRs may be a way to change relationships with parents and peers (in terms of time spent with parents or topics of conversation with peers) (Gleason et al., 2020). Adolescents will often collect items related to their favorite media persona, including hanging posters in their rooms (Steele & Brown, 1995) or buying merchandise or media content (Aubrey et al., 2010). Beyond these behaviors related to their real-life relationships and surroundings, adolescents also engage in behaviors to strengthen their PSRs. These behaviors are largely driven by a desire to reduce uncertainty in the relationship and learn more about their favorite media figure

(Perse & Rubin, 1989). Strategies to reduce uncertainty can be passive, such as observing the media figure in media content or on social media; more active strategies would include asking others and active information seeking (Perse & Rubin, 1989). In interpersonal relationships, people also rely on interaction with each other to reduce uncertainty. In the past, opportunities for interaction with media figures were limited and therefore not ideal strategies for reducing uncertainty. However, digitization and social media have likely increased the feasibility of this tactic in PSRs (Bond, 2016). In seeking to reduce uncertainty about the target of their parasocial attachment, adolescents are also seeking to reduce uncertainty about themselves (Erickson et al., 2018).

Types and Targets of Adolescent Parasocial Relationships

For the most part, adolescent PSRs are pseudofriendships based on social attraction (Gleason et al., 2017). Adolescents also report viewing the media figure to whom they are attached as a mentor, teacher, and romantic partner (Gleason et al., 2017). The media targets of this attraction are extremely varied, but tend to be athletes, actors, singers, and general celebrities (Bond, 2016; Gleason et al., 2017). Adolescents are drawn to celebrities with whom they perceive a degree of similarity and whom they find physically and socially attractive (Bond, 2018; Gleason et al., 2017; Rubin & Step, 2000; Tukachinsky et al., 2020). The personality of the media figure is an important factor as well (Gleason et al., 2017), and sources of attraction (personality, physical appearance, attitude homophily) can vary depending on the media figure themselves (Gleason et al., 2017). Adolescents also form stronger connections to media figures with consistent representation across media outlets (Giles, 2002).

Population Differences

Of course, the experiences of PSRs are not the same for all adolescents. It is likely that adolescents from populations that have difficulty developing real-life relationships with others or who have a strong desire to escape might have more powerful PSRs than adolescents who easily develop relationships and do not experience social isolation (Bond, 2018). Additionally, the need for the safety and stability of a PSR may vary depending on the risks, emotional and physical, posed in forming relationships for some populations (Erickson et al., 2018).

Gender Differences

Parasocial relationship research on adolescents tends to foreground the experiences of adolescent girls (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). This focus stems from perceptions that adolescent girls have more frequent and stronger PSRs and that they face more risk than adolescent boys in establishing real-life relationships due to social pressures (Erickson et al., 2018). Empirical evidence for gender differences in intensity or frequency of PSRs is mixed. Many studies have found that adolescent girls experience more intense PSRs

than boys (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Bond, 2016; Boon & Lomore, 2001; Theran et al., 2010). However, Gleason et al. (2017) found that more adolescent boys reported PSRs than girls, and that PSR intensity was the same across genders. Others have found no significant gender difference (Tukachinsky, 2011; Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018; Tukachinsky Forster, 2021). It is possible that girls might be more comfortable reporting PSRs than boys, so it is unclear whether there is an overall difference in boys' and girls' experiences of PSRs in adolescence (Theran et al., 2010).

There is evidence that adolescent boys and girls choose different media figures and types of media figures for PSRs and that the nature of their relationships with the media figures may differ as well (Gleason et al., 2017). Adolescent girls tend to describe their PSRs as more relational and emotionally close, while boys report more of a hierarchical relationship, often based on shared activities (Gleason et al., 2017). Boys are also more likely to choose athletes for PSRs while girls are more likely to choose actors and singers (Gleason et al., 2017). Heterosexual adolescent boys are the most likely to report same-sex PSRs, while girls and nonheterosexual boys report more of a mix of same-sex and opposite-sex PSRs (Bond, 2018; Hoffner et al., 2006, 2008). Review of research on PSRs in adults finds no empirical evidence of difference between the intensity of same-sex PSRs and opposite-sex PSRs, even though most of the research operationalizes friendship or other nonromantic PSRs as same sex (Tukachinsky et al., 2020).

Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents

Although the research on lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adolescents (as well as on gender nonbinary and trans adolescents) is limited, there is some evidence to suggest that LGB adolescents might turn to PSRs as a safe form of socialization with more frequency than heterosexual adolescents. LGB adolescents face the stress of being part of a minoritized population alongside complications in forming peer relationships, which may lead them to turn to media for socialization and companionship (Bond, 2018). In a study on LBG and non-LGB youth, Bond (2018) found a slight correlation between loneliness and PSRs in the LGB participants; this correlation was not present in the non-LBG participants. LGB adolescents were more likely to have PSRs with fictional characters than non-LGB adolescents, and the PSRs of LGB adolescents who did not have real-life LGB friends were stronger and more likely to be with a media figure who identifies as LGB. See Chapter 14 for a more detailed discussion of the role of media in the lives of LGB individuals.

Functions of Parasocial Relationships in Adolescence

Research on PSRs is most often approached from a uses-and-gratifications perspective, considering the specific needs and functions of media in the lives of audiences (Bond, 2018; Tukachinsky Forster, 2021). In adolescence, this approach involves considering how PSRs contribute to the achievement of developmental tasks (Gleason et al., 2017). Generally speaking, adolescents can experience vicarious learning through media figures,

which allows them to explore themselves and the world beyond their immediate context (Giles, 2010; Greene & Adams-Price, 1990). It follows then that PSRs can be a means of achieving developmental tasks and that the specific functionality of PSRs will vary across adolescents and development (Hoffner, 2008). Specifically, adolescents use PSRs to aid in identity development, increase their autonomy, provide companionship and social bonding, and shape behaviors, scripts, and schemas.

Identity Development

Perhaps the most essential task of adolescence, identity development, involves experimentation and assessment of many facets of identity, including sexual identity, gender identity, career identity, political ideology, moral or religious identity, and social identity (Hoffner et al., 2008). PSRs provide an opportunity for adolescents to explore, test, and determine these adult identities (Bond, 2018; Boon & Lomore, 2001; Greene & Adams-Price, 1990; Hoffner, 2008). Further, the development of a concrete sense of overall identity, or ego identity, described as a sense of individual uniqueness and feeling of comfort with oneself, can contribute to overall emotional well-being (Erikson, 1968; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Hoffner, 2008).

Parasocial relationships with media figures provide adolescents with both a set of possible identities and characteristics and the space to test out those identities in a safe manner (Gleason et al., 2017; Greene & Adams-Price, 1990). In adulthood, people tend to use PSIs and PSRs as a means to move toward an ideal self. However, in adolescence, that ideal self has not been determined (Gleason et al., 2020). Steele and Brown's (1995) media practice model provides a theoretical framework for how adolescents might test out and incorporate media and PSRs into their identities. In this model, an adolescent selects a media object or parasocial attachment intentionally, learns about and engages with the media persona, adjusts their behaviors in line with assessment of their experience with the media persona, and ultimately integrates their relationship with the person and the associated traits and behaviors into their identity. This model aligns well with the Knapp (1978, cited in Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019) model of interpersonal relationships applied to PSRs in the work of Tukachinsky and Stever (2019). That model consists of four stages as well: initiation, experimentation, intensification, and integration. Both models foreground the importance of experimentation and getting to know a media figure and their attributes as an essential part of the PSR process. PSRs allow adolescents to explore possible careers (Hoffner, 2008; Hoffner et al., 2006; Van Den Bulck & Beullens, 2007); romantic identities (Erickson et al., 2018; Tukachinsky Forster, 2021); and self-concept (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007).

Autonomy

Adolescents are in the process of distancing themselves, to a degree, from their family units in order to prepare for adulthood. An important aspect of this preparation involves developing a sense of autonomy (Erikson, 1968). Parasocial relationships can aid an adolescent

in achieving autonomy by providing a safe stepping stone outside of the family (Adam & Sizemore, 2013). These relationships can also be a source of information for adolescents and serve as teachers that are chosen by the adolescent (Bond, 2018). This information can, in turn, help facilitate both their independence and the negotiation of changing relationships with friends and family (Bond 2018). In fact, attachment to celebrities has been associated with increased overall emotional autonomy (Giles & Maltby, 2004).

Companionship

The needs fulfilled by PSRs in adolescence are most often associated with social affinity (Cohen & Perse, 2003; Gleason et al., 2017). It has been suggested that PSRs may serve a compensatory function for adolescents who are isolated or lonely—extending their social circles and providing a functional alternative to social relationships (see Chapter 10). This parasocial compensation hypothesis posits that PSRs can help offset problems in relationship functioning by supplementing an existing relationship with an imaginative positive relationship in which acceptance is guaranteed (Gleason et al., 2020). The need for compensatory PSRs may be especially strong in times of crisis (Bond, 2021). An increased need to belong and desire to feel liked have been linked to stronger PSRs in adolescence, partially supporting this hypothesis (Roseaen & Dibble, 2008). However, on the whole, there is limited evidence of a general compensatory function of PSRs in adolescence (Bond, 2021; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007).

Instead, most empirical research seems to support a complementary function of PSRs (Bond, 2021) wherein people who already have strong relationships and/or secure attachment styles are more likely to engage in stronger PSRs (Engle & Kasser, 2005; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). There are no consistent direct correlations in the empirical research between loneliness or negative attachments to parents or peers and PSRs (Bond, 2021; Giles & Maltby, 2004; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007).

There is some research suggesting that in particular circumstances or special populations, there may be circumstances where PSRs do serve a compensatory function in adolescence (Bond, 2018, 2021). Giles (2002) argued that PSRs can only be compensatory when there is an opportunity for reciprocity, such as with radio call-in lines or, more recently, social media. Adolescents spend a significant amount of their time on social media, and many adolescents follow or engage with posts from media figures (Bond, 2016). Another circumstance that facilitates compensatory uses of PSRs is in cases of extreme isolation, such as the conditions faced by people across the world during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bond, 2021). PSRs grew during this time, especially for people who either spent less time with others in person or more time with others virtually (Bond, 2021). Bond (2021) suggested that this finding is likely the result of a blurred line between interpersonal and parasocial socializing in virtual space. A certain degree of intensity of a PSR may also be a requirement for that relationship to serve as a functional alternative to social interaction (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019).

It may also be that PSRs serve a compensatory function in adolescents who are from special populations and for whom social interaction presents more risk, such as the LGB community (see Chapter 14). LGB adolescents reported stronger PSRs and more PSRs with LGB celebrities when they did not have real-life LGB friends, and, in the LGB population studied, there was a slight correlation between loneliness and PSRs (Bond, 2018). There are likely many more populations for whom this is true.

Social Bonding

In addition to possibly providing companionship, PSRs provide adolescents with opportunities for social bonding. Shared celebrity attachments can be a low-stakes way to bond with peers (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Giles, 2000; Gleason et al., 2020). Discussing media figures can help adolescents practice social skills and fulfill needs for social affinity (Cohen & Perse, 2003; Gleason et al., 2020). Adolescents can rehearse social roles using their shared PSRs as a foundation to inform their peer relationships (Bond, 2018).

Beyond a shared topic of conversations to facilitate bonding, PSRs are also a source of social bonding. In a PSR, although it is not the same as a one-to-one interpersonal relationship, there is a sense of closeness and bonding (Schiappa et al., 2007). There is uncertainty reduction and shifting levels of intimacy and closeness across the relationship, and PSRs offer positive social interactions with no risk of rejection. This relates to the parasocial compensation hypothesis, but rather than suggesting that PSRs are filling a void, here PSRs are merely one of many options for fulfilling a need for social bonding and a feeling of closeness.

Behaviors, Scripts, and Schemas

Parasocial relationships often increase the likelihood of media effects in adolescents (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Adolescents report that they perceive the influence of celebrities on their values, lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviors (Boon & Lomore, 2001).

Media figures can shape behaviors by providing specific behavioral models for adolescents to follow (Bond, 2018; Boon & Lomore, 2001; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Although direct behavioral measures are rare for both ethical and practical reasons, researchers believe that PSRs increase the likelihood that adolescents will engage in or accept risky or destructive behaviors (Boon & Lomore, 2001). Bond and Drogos (2014) found that the positive relationship between exposure to *The Jersey Shore*, a reality television series aired by MTV from 2009 to 2012, and permissive sexual attitudes was mediated by PSRs with the characters. In other words, adolescents who felt a connection with a character on *The Jersey Shore* were more likely to endorse risky sexual behavior the more that they watched the show. In a more direct behavioral link, Harrison (1997) found that interpersonal attraction to thin media characters was related to increased eating disorder symptoms and behaviors.

Much of the research on adolescents and PSRs focuses on attitude change. Media figures with whom adolescents have a PSR likely exert significant influence and impact adolescent attitudes, scripts, and schemas (Boon & Lomore, 2001; Rubin & Step, 2000). This influence is likely the result of a decreased level of counterarguing when faced with a parasocial friend (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019) and a desire for identification with and connection to the media figure (Greenwood, 2009). In a 2009 study, Greenwood found that PSRs with male characters were related to increased body surveillance in adolescent women, suggesting an internalization of body ideals. Others have also found a relationship between attraction to a thin media character and increased body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls (Harrison, 1997; Maltby et al., 2005). PSRs with media figures also influenced adolescents reported work preferences, such that the income and education level of the adolescent's reported dream job correlated with the income and education level of the job held by their favorite character (Hoffner et al., 2006).

Adolescents, like all people, make sense of the world through individualized construct systems, or scripts and schemas, in their minds (Perse & Rubin, 1989). By helping to shape and test these constructs, PSRs can influence adolescents' beliefs about the world, their attitudes, and their behaviors.

Parasocial Romantic Relationships

Although PSRs in adolescence can come in many forms, including friendship and mentorship, parasocial *romantic* relationships (PSRRs) are an especially powerful socialization agent (Erickson et al., 2018; Tukachinsky, 2011). Romantic and sexual identity development and exploration is one of the most challenging aspects of adolescent socialization (Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001). Adolescents enter the dating world with limited knowledge and practice when it comes to sexuality and romance (Collins, 2003) and must rely on vicarious learning and limited romantic experience combined with information gained from other socialization agents, including media (Collins et al., 2009), to provide scripts, schemas, norms, and expectations. Media are critical educators for adolescents when it comes to sex and romance; adolescents regularly report media as one of their top three sources of information (Ward, 2003). Media are likely especially important for populations who face significant isolation or risk in exploring their sexuality and romantic identity (Bond, 2018).

Early romantic relationships, usually beginning with romantic crushes on distant others or peers (Collins et al., 2009), can influence adolescents' identity by providing a space to explore and experiment (Collins et al., 2009). Romantic relationships with media figures are especially attractive for their relative safety (Tukachinsky Forster, 2021), and PSR research suggests that adolescents may, in fact, often begin their exploration of romantic and sexual identities via romantic attachments to media figures (Erickson et al., 2018). There is a major emphasis on being in love and having a romantic relationship during adolescence (Simon et al., 1992); however, puberty is occurring an average of about

5 years earlier for adolescents in the United State than in the previous century (Larson et al., 1999). As a result of this shift, evident in other parts of the world as well, adolescents are grappling with romantic emotions and experiences at an earlier age, even if only due to how they are treated by others in response to their physical appearance (Larson et al., 1999). It is no surprise, given these factors, that romantic parasocial attachments to media figures are a common and normal experience for many adolescents (Erickson et al., 2018; Tukachinsky, 2011).

Characteristics of Parasocial Romantic Relationships

Parasocial romantic relationship in adolescence can be understood as the experience of having a crush on a celebrity and developing an unreciprocated romantic attachment to that celebrity involving frequent fantasizing and idealization (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Erickson et al., 2018). These relationships involve a sense of both physical attraction and emotional intimacy and may be romantic and/or sexual in nature (Tukachinsky, 2011). Studies reliably showed that early PSRRs occur around the same time as adolescents' first sexual fantasies, at about age 13 and before they are sexually active (Tukachinsky Forster, 2021). Like early interpersonal romantic relationships in adolescence, attachments to media figures can seem short, trivial, or casual to observers (Collins et al., 2009). This misconception reveals the unique nature of these relationships for adolescents—the goal is not the dyadic relationship itself but rather the use of the relationship to help define the self, build relationships with other peers, and understand the emotions of romantic attachments (Collins et al., 2009; Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001).

Parasocial romantic relationships in adolescence, also theorized as adolescent romantic parasocial attachments (ARPAs) by Erickson et al. (2018), are safe, secure, and controlled by the fan (Engle & Kasser, 2005). Adolescents can use these relationships to explore romantic views and attitudes and reject, modify, or accept possible scripts and schemas (Engle & Kasser, 2005). PSRRs also provide adolescents with the opportunity to get to know and become comfortable with their own feelings and fantasies (Engle & Kasser; Erickson et al., 2018).

Like friendship-based PSRs, PSRRs involve a combination of emotions, cognitions, behaviors, and fantasies (Erickson et al., 2018; Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001; Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018). In the case of PSRRs, the emotions, cognitions, and fantasies focus on the romantic attachment to the media figure. Fantasy is an especially important element of PSRRs in adolescence and offer the opportunity to rehearse future romantic interactions with peers (Erickson et al., 2018). Fantasy is an important part of the sexual and romantic socialization process, even beyond the experiences of PSRRs (Erickson et al., 2018). Adolescent fantasies about media figures are often aided by the use of posters in their rooms or other mementos or reminders (Karnoil, 2001). PSSR-related fantasies can also facilitate peer conversations and increase an adolescent's sense of belonging (Karnoil, 2001).

For fantasy to play such a strong role, heightened psychological involvement and emotional connection are required (Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018). For adolescents, the emotional aspect of a PSRR, rather than any sort of physical attraction or perceived intimacy, drives the attachment (Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018). This is likely due to the emphasis in early adolescence on romantic relationships rather than overtly sexual relationships. Accordingly, adolescent girls often begin experiences with PSRSs by having crushes on more feminized, less sexualized men and only later move on to PSRRs based more on masculinity and sexual appeal (Greene & Adams-Price, 1990; Karnoil, 2001).

The vast majority of research on PSRRs has focused on adolescent girls rather than adolescent boys. This is likely due to many factors, including the increased willingness of girls to share PSRRs with researchers and the perceived higher risks of interpersonal romantic relationships for girls (Erickson et al., 2018). However, there is evidence suggesting that boys experience PSRRs as well (Tukachinsky Forster, 2021).

Functions of PSRRs in Adolescence

As PSRs in other tasks related to development in adolescence, PSRRs provide a space for adolescents to satisfy their increasing interest in and social pressure toward sex and romance while minimizing conflict, risk, and rejection (Adam & Sizemore, 2013; Erickson et al., 2018; Fisher, 2006; Tukachinsky, 2011). Additionally, adolescents can enter into relationships with media figures without taking on any responsibilities to the media figure (Karnoil, 2001). For adolescents who are interested in being in love but not ready for sexual relationships or even romantic relationships with peers, engaging in PSRRs allows them to address key developmental questions related to romantic identity, romantic and sexual preferences, and norms (Greene & Adams-Price, 1990).

For adolescents who may not have available romantic partners, PSRRs are rehearsals for future romantic relationships. For example, young women tend to mature an average of 2 years earlier than young men, creating a gap in their stages of development and a potential paucity of partners for heterosexual girls (Karnoil, 2001). PSRRs can teach adolescents about how to act in a romantic relationship, what to expect from a partner, who they might be attracted to, and what a romantic relationship feels like (Erickson et al., 2018). Experiencing a PSRR can open a space to explore sexuality, including romantic and sexual yearnings outside of traditional relationship norms and structures, and to subvert societal expectations (Karnoil, 2001).

Most importantly, as a tool in identity development and self-socialization, PSRRs are emotionally and physically safe from negative consequences (Erickson et al., 2018). In romantic and/or sexual relationships with peers, adolescents may face rejection, risks to their physical health (both due to sexually transmitted infections and the possibility of intimate partner violence), and peer disapproval (Erickson et al., 2018; Greene & Adams-Price, 1990). These consequences may be especially salient for adolescent girls, who also face the loss of a "good girl" reputation, particularly if they go through puberty

at a younger age (Greene & Adams-Price, 1990). Adolescents control PSRRs and thus are protected from these potential negative consequences to romantic or sexual relationships.

Effects of PSRRs on Adolescents

Early romantic experiences, like those in adolescence, are highly formative and influence cognitions, expectations, and behaviors in later romantic and sexual relationships as well as overall adult emotional well-being (Collins, 2003; Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018). These influences have the potential to be positive as well as negative. As a safe place to practice romantic and sexual relationships, PSRRs might allow adolescents to successfully complete developmental tasks with limited trauma and possible benefits (Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018). Positive emotional experiences in early romantic relationships with peers are associated with open-mindedness, perseverance, self-esteem, and social confidence in adulthood (Collins, 2003). It stands to reason that the same possibilities exist for early romantic relationships with media figures.

However, one major aspect of the impact of early relationships on adolescents is the nature of the chosen partner or media figure (Collins, 2003). Romantic and sexual content in mass media tends to emphasize traditional gender roles, reinforce the heterosexual script of an active sexual man and a passive pure woman, and prioritize romantic and sexual relationships above all other aspects of characters' lives (Florsheim, 2003). The media figures that are presented to adolescents as romantic partners often align with these themes as well (Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018).

Parasocial romantic relationships can promote learning and persuasion in adolescence (Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018), particularly related to partner preferences, relationship expectancies and satisfaction, attitudes, scripts, schemas, and identity development. PSRRs shape adolescent partner preferences by providing an ideal partner onto whom to project a romantic relationship (and an idealized version of the self) (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Erickson et al., 2018; Greene & Adams-Price, 1990). Experiencing PSRRs in adolescence has also been associated with decreased relationship satisfaction in emerging adulthood (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018).

In relation to the learning function served by PSRRs, engaging in a perceived romantic relationship with a media figure in adolescence has been associated with various relationship outcomes, including higher endorsement of the heterosexual script (Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018); belief in romanticized ideals (Driesmans et al., 2016; Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018); beliefs about the centrality of romance to well-being (Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018); and negative evaluations of real-life romantic partners and relationship experiences (Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018; Martino et al., 2005; Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018). PSRRs also emphasize the centrality of romantic and sexual relationships to adolescents (Aubrey et al., 2010; Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018; Simon et al., 1992). Emerging adult women with stronger recalled adolescent PSRRs reported higher levels of relationship-contingent

self-esteem (Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018; Johnson et al., 2012). Others have hypothesized that PSRRs might have an impact on overall well-being (Erickson et al., 2018; Furman & Shaffer, 2003), body surveillance (Greenwood, 2009), identity development (including aspects of identity beyond romantic and sexual identity; Furman & Shaffer, 2003), and perhaps even sexual self-efficacy (Martino et al., 2005).

Summary and Future Directions

It is clear from the research to date that PSRs and PSRRs in adolescence are a normative part of development and socialization (Erickson et al., 2018; Giles, 2002; Theran et al., 2010; Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018). Adolescents experience significant biological and social changes at a time when they are also faced with achieving important developmental tasks such as identity development and establishing autonomy (Blakemore, 2012; Erikson, 1968). PSRs involve emotions, cognitions, fantasies, and behaviors and are, in many ways, akin to interpersonal or "real-life" relationships (Gleason et al., 2017; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Adolescents utilize PSRs and PSRRs to explore, rehearse, and establish identities across a variety of areas and to learn scripts, schemas, and norms to help them successfully transition into the adult world (Giles, 2010; Gleason et al., 2017; Greene & Adams-Price, 1990). These are consequential relationships for adolescents and can influence their attitudes, behaviors, and senses of self (Boon & Lomore, 2001; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). There remains, however, much that is unknown about PSRs in adolescence, and there is significant future work to be done.

Future Directions

Additional Populations. To date, the vast majority of research on PSRs has, largely due to convenient and available participants, focused on White, female, heterosexual adolescents. There is some work on the experiences of LGB adolescents with PSRs (see Chapter 14), but more research examining this and additional populations is needed. It is likely that there are other special populations for whom PSRs may be particularly valuable or salient due to social isolation or perceived risk of peer relationships (Bond, 2018). For example, researchers might consider the experiences of transgender and nonbinary adolescents with PSRs and PSRRs or adolescents with disabilities and/or chronic illnesses. Researchers should also seek to diversify their participants to reflect experiences beyond those of White women. There are important questions to be asked about how adolescent boys experience PSRRs, how and with whom non-White adolescents engage in PSRs and where those experiences may differ from what is currently known, and what the PSRs of adolescents from more isolated or rural locations look like.

Technological Changes. Much of the canonical theory on PSRs and PSRRs was developed prior to the existence of social media or the digitization and fragmentation of media content. These changes are simultaneously increasing media use and changing the form and experience of media engagement (Bond, 2016; Erickson et al., 2019).

Celebrities on social media engage in a form of performative intimacy, seemingly providing fans with more disclosure and access to their "backstage" authentic personalities (Bond, 2016). Social media also provide an increased opportunity for reciprocity; adolescents can send messages directly to media figures in seconds and, at times, even receive replies or acknowledgment (Bond, 2016). PSRs in the social media age provide even stronger and more appealing opportunities to practice social relationships (Hoffner, 2008) and increase opportunities for perceived intimacy by allowing for interactive strategies of uncertainty reduction (Giles, 2002).

Adolescents follow celebrities on social media, especially Instagram and Twitter (Bond, 2016). In a 2016 study, Bond found that 70% of adolescents who participated in his study reported following a celebrity on at least one form of social media, and 50% reported following celebs on two or more social media platforms (Bond, 2016). Twitter use to follow celebrities was associated with increased PSRs, likely because Twitter posts were perceived as both intimate and legitimate due to the user's inability to edit posts and the use of Twitter posts as legitimate news sources in mass media at the time of the study (Bond, 2016). Social media posts are perceived as spontaneous and genuine, especially on Twitter, and likely provide a sense of increased intimacy in PSRs.

The ways that adolescents are engaging with digitized media are also changing the nature of PSRs. The rise of streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime has led to an increase in "binge-watching" media content, which in turn has been associated with increased PSRs and transportation (Erickson et al., 2019). In a digital, fragmented media landscape, media figures may seem more accessible and less distant, especially social media stars or YouTube personalities. These changes in how adolescents engage with media, who they are engaging with, and the increased possibility of reciprocity demand further investigation. Researchers should seek to understand how these changes in the media landscape are reshaping PSRs and how adolescents are interpreting and internalizing these changes (Bond, 2016).

Differences in Context/Expansion of Complexity. In many areas of PSR research, like the differences (or not) between adolescent boys and girls and the use of PSRs to compensate (or not) for deficits in interpersonal relationships, there is contradictory evidence and little consensus (Greenwood, 2009). Giles (2002) has argued that this disagreement is, in part, due to a lack of qualitative research on PSRs. Individual differences in PSR experiences may be due to individual social development priorities (Gleason et al., 2017), or the specific context and moment in which a PSR is experienced (Bond, 2021; Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018).

In his research on adolescent relationship development, Collins (2003) posed the question: "How and under what circumstances do romantic relationships affect individual development?" This question could easily be applied to research on PSRs to determine how and under what circumstances PSRs and PSRRs affect individual development. Evidence supporting a need for this approach can be seen in Bond's (2021) examination

of the rise in PSRs during COVID-19 lockdowns and the unique nature of PSRs in a moment of crisis and Bond's (2016) research on LGB youth and the circumstances under which PSRs can serve a compensatory function.

Beyond context, researchers should also revise their models of PSRs to encompass a more complex understanding of PSRs and PSRRs and their functions. Tukachinsky and Stever (2019) proposed a model of PSRs that takes into account changes in the relationships over time and posits that different stages in the PSR process could result in different functions and outcomes. Past work has primarily imagined PSRs as somewhat static, or merely as starting, happening, and ending, but a more nuanced approach is necessary.

Most previous work has also failed to meaningfully distinguish PSRs at different moments in adolescence. Adolescents in their early teens have limited experience with adult identity, romantic relationships, or focusing their social world outside of the home (Gleason et al., 2020). During this time, adolescents are more likely to turn to PSRs to facilitate moving to a more peer-centered world, acting as a bit of a bridge from parents to peers (Giles & Maltby, 2004). As is reflected in the shift in PSRR targets during later adolescence, with sexual and romantic experience (and an eye toward emerging adulthood), adolescents in their later teens use PSRs to build on their developing identities and experiences (Karnoil, 2001). Work examining the ways in which PSRs might serve different functions at different moments in development is limited to date. Understanding the complexity of PSRs will need to involve increased qualitative data collection to allow adolescents to speak to their own experiences as well (Giles, 2002).

Media Content. Although PSRs are individual and content is generally secondary to the experience of the relationship (Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018), there is still reason to further examine the specific media figures and content with which adolescents are engaging. Parasocial processes are different depending on the nature of celebrities chosen and the types of relationships imagined (Gleason et al, 2017), and examining the media figures could help researchers to understand the different functions of PSRs at different stages of social development.

Unlike other socialization agents like family, peers, or schools, media are motivated by money rather than the best interest of the adolescent (Arnett, 1995). Media figures and celebrities are human fantasies, manufactured to induce PSRs and PSRRs (Aubrey et al. 2010), and continued fan involvement is encouraged through publicized (often sexual) iconography (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). These manufactured media personalities are most likely to be White, heterosexual, and wealthy, particularly in the cases of men designed to induce romantic attachment (Aubrey et al., 2010; Bond, 2018). Faced with a deficit in LGB celebrity options in mainstream media, LGB youth turn to sci-fi and fantasy worlds and create personalized, negotiated readings of media figures (Bond, 2018). This phenomenon, and other similar responses to the absence or presence of specific types of media figures, deserves further study.

Different Types of PSRs. This chapter has covered the primary types of PSRs studied in adolescence, pseudofriendships, and romantic parasocial attachments. Additional research is needed on other types of PSRs in adolescence, such as the mentor-type relationships describe by boys in the work of Gleason et al. (2017). Outside of the adolescent population, PSRs can be based on dislike and even neutrality (Tian & Hoffner, 2010) and further research on these types of PSRs in adolescence is warranted.

Research on the specific role of parasocial interactions (PSIs) in adolescence is also limited. PSIs occur when a viewer experiences a series of affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to a media persona while engaging with that persona in the moment (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Klimmt et al., 2006). These experiences end when the viewer turns off the screen or disengages from the media content. PSRs, in contrast, continue beyond the time of media engagement and involve ongoing perceived attachment to the media persona (Klimmt et al, 2006). Both PSIs and PSRs are unidirectional, mediated experiences, but PSRs involve an ongoing sense of a pseudofriendship or relationship with the media figure (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Nearly all adolescents experience PSIs, and fewer, but still many, also experience PSRs (Gleason et al., 2017). PSRs are more strongly correlated with media involvement (Tukachinsky et al., 2020) and involve more time, energy, and investment on the part of the viewer (Gleason et al., 2017). PSRs are also strongly associated with identification with a media figure and transportation into media narratives, both of which relate to stronger potential effects (Erickson et al., 2019; Tukachinsky et al., 2020). As a result, the majority of research examining parasocial experiences in adolescence focuses on PSRs rather than PSIs. However, there may be specific functions of PSIs in adolescence, and an examination of PSIs as another important parasocial experience is warranted.

These and other different manifestations of adolescent parasocial experiences should be a focus of future research as well. Adolescents use parasocial engagement for unique developmental functions, and experience parasocial engagements particularly intensely. These relationships are consequential, normative, and meaningful to adolescents. As such, additional research in this area is warranted. Research on adolescent PSRs is growing, and there is much exciting work to be done.

Notes

1. mPFC = medial prefrontal cortex, pSTS = posterior superior temporal sulcus, ATC = anterior temporal cortex.
2. Those who favor the pathological perspective on PSRs argue that the lack of evidence for pathological attachments in adolescence is simply a result of the limited time span of adolescence itself. As the argument goes, PSRs, especially intense ones, take time to develop. Thus, relationships begun in adolescence will fully form and (in rare cases) become problematic (Giles & Maltby, 2004). However, contrary to the pathological approach, it is far more likely that parasocial experiences in adolescence play a unique developmental role and should be accepted as normative. See Chapter 9 on discussion of PSRs from a pathological perspective.

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CHAPTER

9 PSRs in Adults and Older Adults

Gayle Stever

Abstract

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are a part of a lifelong range of experiences that begin in early childhood and extend well into old age. Parasocial is defined as any social connection that is nonreciprocated. This chapter considers the functions and characteristics of parasocial experiences (PSEs) in adulthood and discusses the unique roles of PSEs in different life stages from a developmental psychology perspective. It reviews research in adults and the function of these experiences at different critical places in development and among older adults. Finally, the chapter discusses celebrity worship and pathological perspectives on PSEs. The chapter concludes by considering whether the term *parasocial* implies some kind of pathology or unhealthy behavior and considers possible objections to this term.

Key Words: developmental psychology, life stages, attachment, personality, celebrity worship, pathology

Parasocial Experiences in Adulthood

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are a part of a lifelong range of experiences that begin in early childhood (see Chapter 7) and extend well into old age. This chapter recounts the research into parasocial experiences (PSEs) beginning in young adulthood through the end of life.

Parasocial is defined as any social connection that is nonreciprocated. As discussed in Chapter 2, most PSRs are mediated but not all of them have to be; for instance, a professor in a large lecture hall, or a minister in a very large church, is likely to be known without knowing the people to whom they speak. While these are examples of nonmediated PSRs, most PSRs are with people who are known primarily through media channels, with examples ranging from television to YouTube to popular music. PSRs can also be with fictional characters and don't have to be with real persons at all; Harry Potter or Luke Skywalker comes to mind.

A foundational work in this area is John Caughey's (1984) *Imaginary Social Worlds.* While not using the term "parasocial," Caughey discussed the very phenomenon that was

proposed in Horton and Wohl's (1956) seminal article that introduced the term. Both of these works recognized the power of imagined interactions when describing the social world that we inhabit.

It is important not to confuse "imagined" with "not real." The connections experienced with distant others, whether fictional characters or distant celebrities, are very real. Why and how do individuals develop them? The following sections review several theories that offer an insight into these questions. Following discussion of PSEs from a normative theoretical perspective, the chapter concludes by considering whether the term "parasocial" implies some kind of pathology or unhealthy behavior and considers possible objections to this term.

Theoretical Understandings of Parasocial Experiences

Parasocial theory builds on a number of theoretical traditions from the field of life span development. Attachment theory (Bretherton, 1992), personality-type theory (Jung, 1971), life-span stage theory (Erikson & Erikson, 1981), and social cognitive theory (SCT; Bandura, 1986, 2001) form theoretical foundations for understanding PSEs in the various stages of adulthood (Stever, 2011).

Parasocial Attachment (PSA). PSA is a specific type of PSR that involves the audience member looking to someone known from afar as a source of comfort, inspiration, or security. To understand PSA, we look to classical attachment theory (Bretherton, 1992), where an attachment is defined as proximity seeking for the purpose of achieving a sense of safe haven and felt security. Just as an infant looks to a caregiver for comfort, sometimes adults look to others for comfort as well. Because of more advanced cognitive abilities compared to those of a young child, adults are able to establish imagined connections with others that provide comfort from a distance.

Human beings are hardwired to be attracted to the familiar faces and voices of other human beings. There is a real sense in which the brain processes mediated messages in the same way that face-to-face messages are processed (Reeves & Nass, 1996). Thus, the tendency to feel close to mediated persona whose voices and faces are well known to a viewer follows from developmental theory that supports the idea that attachments are formed based on such familiarity (Stever, 2017). Thus, the PSA is a natural development for a person who has gotten to know that mediated persona. This can be a media celebrity, a fictional character, or some combination of both (e.g., a familiar actor playing a favorite character).

While the literature supports the idea that almost everyone engages in parasocial interaction (PSI) and PSR, some studies have shown that those who have insecure attachments, particularly of the anxious type (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998), are more likely to form PSR. This link between types of attachment and PSE has been well supported in the research literature (Cohen, 2004; Cole & Leets, 1999; Greenwood, 2008).

Personality-Type Theory. Jung (1971) believed that individuals have preferences in their interactions with others that represent the flow of energy inward or outward,

the perceiving of the world either through the five senses or intuition, and the use of either thoughts or feelings to process those perceptions and make decisions about them. From that theory came extroversion and introversion, sensing and intuition, and feeling and thinking as components of personality-type theory. Whether or not one recognizes these as distinct features of personality, having an individual report their preferences with respect to these dichotomies can be a good measure of how the world is processed, indeed through which lens the world is viewed.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985), the most commonly used measure of Jungian personality, has been referred to as a measure of cognitive style (Carey et al., 1989; Keen & Bronsema, 1981). Even if one does not accept the premise that Jung was talking about differences in personality, the idea that Jungian theory can identify specific cognitive styles is important as PSRs are a form of cognition about persons who are not known firsthand, but rather are known through media. If participants indicate that their preference for processing ideas is intuitive, they are indicating that the abstract or theoretical is an aspect of information that is valued and acted on. This, arguably, is at the heart of PSR, the idea that one can interact socially with a theoretical persona or imagined person.

Jung also was committed to the idea that all personality types represented positive functioning and normal cognition. He rejected the notion of "normal and abnormal" and instead saw differences in the way individuals choose to perceive and process the world. This also speaks to the heart of controversies in writings about parasocial theory with respect to whether or not PSR is an indication of some kind of pathology. If the PSR is based on the internal processing of abstract or fanciful personae, then Jung would resoundingly label that as completely normal and functional.

Based on the work of Myers and McCaulley (1985), a measurement of these personality types is a self-report of individual preferences with respect to how to engage the world. The Extrovert (E) has a flow of energy to the outer world of people and things, while an Introvert (I) has a flow of energy to the inner world of thoughts and ideas. The Sensing type (S) prefers to view reality, grounded in the five senses and what is concrete and in front of her or him. The Intuitive (N) type has a more abstract orientation based on theories, possibilities, and what could be. When one combines these into ES, EN, IS, and IN, you have four types of individuals with preferences for the way to process the world. The ES person flows to the outer world of concrete people and things that can be known through the five senses, while the IS person brings the concrete world into the mind where these ideas and plans can be processed. The EN person processes ideas and thoughts with other people, often through conversations, so that the emphasis is on possibilities that are explored in the company of others. The IN person brings ideas and concepts into the world of thoughts and ideas and processes these things internally in a way that encourages theory, fantasy, narrative, and new ideas about the abstract and fanciful.

In a study of characteristics of dedicated fans, Stever (1990) identified individuals who were engaged in PSRs with their favorite media figures. Participants in this research were identified as serious and devoted fans of a media personality. They were chosen based on a list of behavioral criteria for fandom. In addition, on a 10-point Likert scale for "how big a fan are you of this artist," they were each an 8 or higher (for more details on the sample and criteria, see Stever, 1990, 1991, 1995). While it is recognized that "fandom" and "parasocial relationship" are not identical constructs, the participants in this study gave extensive data and were interviewed or submitted narratives for why they were a fan. It was clear from these narratives that these participants saw themselves in a mediated relationship with the target media figure that gave every indication of being a PSR (see Stever, 1994, for more information about the narrative data obtained from fans). The level of commitment to the artist would indicate that these individuals were in the highest level of PSR development, described as "integration" (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). Integration in a PSR is where individuals feel like they have developed a sense of commitment to the media figure with a social recognition of the relationship's importance.

All of these media personalities were real people and not characters in books or on television. The common finding in each of the groups sampled (Stever, 1990, 1991, 1995) was that the Introverted Intuitive (IN) personality was heavily overrepresented in these fan groups. For example, while normative data available at that time would have predicted that about 11% of a general sample would self-report as being an IN type (Macdaid et al., 1986), 38% of the Michael Jackson fans and 43% of the *Star Trek* (single-actor fan club) fans were IN personalities. For the Jackson fans, this was a self-selection ratio of 3.22, while for *Star Trek* fans it was a self-selection ratio of 3.69. In other words, there were more than three times as many INs in these samples as would have been expected had there been no difference between the fan groups and a comparative general population sample. There were additional samples of fans of Bruce Springsteen, Madonna, Prince, George Michael, and Paul McCartney that all followed this trend.

If a PSR involves the individual engaging in a relationship with an internal imagined representation of the real-world person, then this theory would predict that the IN person would be the most likely of all types to engage in such an internal social interaction. The data supported this prediction (Stever, 1991, 1995).

Erikson's Life Span Theory. In discussing PSEs in adulthood, it is useful to use the theory of Erik Erikson in order to organize the discussion. Erikson believed that in the course of adult development, each stage of development had a primary task.

Early Adulthood. According to Erikson, young adults, having theoretically just engaged the task of identity versus role confusion, are now faced with the task of intimacy versus isolation. However, in the study of fans and fan motivations (Stever, 1994, 2009b), in keeping with Erikson's thoughts on the subject (Erikson & Erikson, 1981), girls have for some time been socialized to seek intimacy before identity (as identity was determined by who you are with, so you became "the doctor's wife" and so on). Boys followed the

more traditional trajectory of identity and then intimacy. In coding narratives, the coding team (Stever, 1994) found that adolescent girls were more interested in media figures in a romantic way, while women during their 20s were more likely to report identification. Boys looked to identity figures in adolescence, and this finding was duplicated in other studies (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990), and then in their 20s young men were interested in media celebrities as romantic objects. This was a clear trend in the data (Stever, 1994). These data were collected in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is entirely possible that girls and women no longer precede identity with intimacy. Research would be needed to determine if this trend has held over the past 30 years.

Accepting that both identity and intimacy can be goals in young adulthood, what role do PSE play in the seeking of these goals? Bandura and Evans (2006) believed that a key part of an interest in media figures was that they served as both role models and as models for a variety of vicarious experiences. This would connect with the goal of the formation of identity.

But in pursuit of intimacy, individuals look for romantic partners, or, in the absence of good candidates, they look for romantic connections with others. It is not unusual for older teens and young adults to form "crushes" on media figures who seem to personify an idealized version of the desired partner. But is that all that it is? Is the media interest simply a crush?

What is intimacy? Psychological intimacy is the ability to connect with the thoughts of another (Orlofsky, 1993). "Intimacy is the quality of interaction between individuals, but—from an Eriksonian perspective—it may also be considered a capacity of the individual. . . . Intimacy involves openness and sharing, a mutual trust" (p. 111). This implies the sharing of personal thoughts with another person.

There are really only two ways to connect with the thoughts of another person. One is to listen to them speak, and the other is to read something they have written. Both speech and writing represent the internal thought processes of another person. This points to a good clue for why parasocial connections with otherwise unknown others are so prevalent. The depth of the thought sharing would seem an important variable in the achievement of true psychological intimacy. But how often do we speak to others in our own lives at this level? Perhaps with a partner, we might go that deep, but with everyday relationships, this would be less common.

However, faced with a media celebrity who is speaking his or her mind in a deep and personal way, it then becomes easy to feel that this person is "known" on an intimate level. Through the PSR, there are a number of ways that this can happen. In some cases, the intimacy is real, and, in some cases, it is an illusion. Let us take the "real" cases first.

Songwriters often take their deepest and most personal thoughts and put them into songs. In this way, they share something that seems intimate and part of their internal self. It is no coincidence that some of the most ardent and devoted media fans are the fans of singers and songwriters. An added layer of the expression of intimacy is the music itself,

which can be perceived to communicate yet another aspect of the internal workings of another person's mind.

Consider a well-known song as an example. Paul McCartney wrote the lyric: "Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away." (1965, Yesterday, from Help! by the Beatles on Capitol records). This is written to a plaintive tune that provides emotional resonance to the lyric. When the audience member hears the song, it feels like a window into the thoughts and feelings of McCartney and, even more, comes across this way if he is singing the lyric himself. In interviews with fans (Stever, 1994), this was the way they felt about their favorite singer/songwriter. In addition to McCartney, fans of Bruce Springsteen, Madonna, Prince, Michael Jackson, George Michael, and other popular music artists were included. The intimate connection that fans felt with these artists was, in part, created by this connection with song lyrics that reflected the intimate thinking of the artist. This is a real form of intimate sharing on the part of an artist as the artist puts the song out into the public and the song contains words that represent personal and intimate feelings.

The illusion of intimacy is a more relevant discussion when considering connections with fictional characters. Some fans found that a good way to have imagined interactions with beloved characters was to write their own stories about them. Fan fiction writing has been an extensive creative pursuit, and this form of writing is often the outward expression of the internal dialogue with the character that happens in PSIs and PSRs (Verba, 2003).

Parasocial experiences involve *the illusion of intimacy* (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Adams-Price and Greene (1990) described this as a secondary attachment, referring to the connection one feels with one's own internal model of the favorite artist. For a fan of Paul McCartney, part of the process in PSRs is to have an ongoing internal dialogue as imagined if the fan were able to talk to him. The fantasizing of this intimate dialogue reinforces the illusion of intimacy and makes the fan feel closer to the celebrity. But this process is not unique to PSRs. An admired person known in face-to-face real life will be the object of imagined intimate conversations as well. The difference is the periodic reality checks when one actually talks with this person. Whether or not it progresses to a real intimate relationship depends on factors like mutual attraction and also whether or not the imagined interactions are fulfilled in the real-life interactions in a way that works to create a relationship. If imagined conversations are not played out satisfactorily in real life, one is liable to move on to someone else.

But the important point is that this process of imagined interaction is a fundamental part of both social interaction and relationships and also PSEs. In the absence of any reality checks in PSE, it is more likely that one will progress down the path to a perception that the connection with that distant personality is actually intimate and will be perceived as fulfilling because of actually carrying on both sides of the dialogue. Most fans interviewed were well aware that the PSI and PSR were not real. That did not keep it from being satisfying, particularly for someone who did not have a real-life partner.

Given the task of intimacy versus isolation and the high potential psychological cost of being isolated, it was preferable to have PSIs and PSRs rather than be alone. In some cases, having an imagined partner was a choice consciously made because a recent face-to-face relationship had ended, and it was too painful to contemplate another such relationship. It was a way to avoid a new relationship following the loss of an intimate partner. Escape into a romantic PSR gives the individual a breather, a place to experience a fantasy that is different from one's real-life situation. The PSR becomes a placeholder, often for a period of time when the person is recovering from the previous loss, which most often was either through death or breakup/divorce (Stever, 1994; Tukachinsky Forster, 2021).

Middle Adulthood. Erikson's task of middle adulthood is generativity versus despair. A person reaches a point where she or he has grown in life perspective and life skills and now wants to contribute using that perspective and those skills. In PSRs, this manifests itself in several ways. In my own work, a frequently observed situation was that a fan discovered that the favorite celebrity had a charity she or he championed, and the fan became a partner in that cause. This was observed in every fandom observed and studied (Stever, 2011, 2015).

In addition, a number of individuals expressed a desire to become a coworker or cocreator with their favorite celebrity (Stever, 1994, 2009b). This theme came up so many times that a code was added for it according to the procedures recommended in grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Dozens of cases were identified where this theme had been articulated by the fan.

When the film *This Is It* was produced, after the untimely death of Michael Jackson in 2009, the beginning of the film included interviews with the singers and dancers who had been working with Jackson on a concert event in London that he had been planning. Many of them articulated this same theme, that their childhood and youth had been defined by a desire to work with Jackson and they were there in the film as a result of that desire.

In *Star Trek* fandom, a common theme in talking with fans about their fictional role models, as in this case the admired celebrities represented characters in a narrative, was that the character's profession had inspired that fan to pursue the same profession. DeForest Kelly (Dr. McCoy in the original 1966 *Star Trek* series) spoke often of the many fans who told him they had become doctors after observing his doctor character in the show. James Doohan's fans became engineers and so on. This is another indicator of the desire for generativity, of wanting to give back in the same way the admired character had so contributed (Suhay, 2014).

Another commonly encountered theme with fans has been that in pursuing their fan interest, they developed skills that turned into a career. This is another example of generativity coming out of fandom and PSRs. Developing a fan website can lead to a career as a web developer, writing fan fiction can lead to a career as a book author, and organizing a fan club can lead to a career in leading fan clubs, as has been the case for

Dan Madsen, who originated the very first *Star Trek* Official Fan Club and then went on to develop fan clubs and publications for *Star Wars* and other science fiction franchises. When I interviewed production staff and writers for *Star Trek*, it became clear that many of these people had taken a fandom interest in *Star Trek*, and through creative pursuits, it had become a career (Stever, 2009a).

PSR and Aging: Erikson's Integrity Versus Despair. Some of the concepts that have been measured as possible antecedents to PSIs and PSRs include loneliness, social anxiety, and the need to belong (Rosaen & Dibble, 2016). These are needs that are frequently observed in aging populations. While the findings with respect to how these needs correspond with PSRs are mixed, it is still the case that older adult populations have been observed as participating in PSRs in order to mitigate isolation and loneliness (Jarzyna, 2021; Stever, 2013, 2017).

Jarzyna (2021) discussed the effects of PSIs and PSRs on the social isolation of aging populations during the period of quarantine experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This article reported that those in care facilities for the elderly used PSIs and PSRs to mitigate the effects of the social isolation experienced during the pandemic. Residents of care facilities enjoyed a feeling of companionship with favorite television or sports celebrities that were enhanced through interaction on social media (Derrick et al., 2008).

A number of other studies found that in older adults, PSRs can help mitigate depression (Bernhold, 2019; Bernhold & Metzger, 2020) or enhance the online experience when shopping (C. S. Lim & Kim, 2011) or using travel websites (Kim & Kim, 2017). It was suggested that using streaming group activities such as yoga or religious services or just Facebook, in general, was helpful for aging adults forced into isolation in situations like the pandemic (Conroy et al., 2020). In like manner, television programs have offered PSRs to seniors and helped promote a sense of companionship with favorite television characters (Bernhold & Metzger 2020; Eggermont & Vandebosch 2001).

Social Cognitive Theory. Bandura's (1986) SCT built on his earlier work in social learning theory to suggest that human development is an interaction among cognition, affect, and biological events, influenced by both behavior and persons in the environment. PSEs have been acknowledged to contain all of these elements (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). For Bandura, a primary way that persons in the environment influenced individual development was by serving as role models. Key terms in Bandura's theory were vicarious learning and vicarious experience (Bandura, 2001), and he saw many applications of these concepts to media. From this theory, he coined the term "reciprocal determinism" to suggest that each of the factors in human development affected the others, so that the person, the person's behavior, and persons in the environment had bidirectional influences on each other.

While there are some differences between vicarious social relationships and PSRs, at the core of each of these concepts is the idea of interacting in a significant way with

someone we do not necessarily know in a face-to-face way. With both concepts, there is the potential for modeling or other kinds of influence that can significantly affect individual development.

A number of studies on PSEs have recognized significant linkages between PSEs and Bandura's SCT and also his social learning theory (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; J. S. Lim et al., 2020; Sood & Rogers, 2000; Stever, 2011), particularly as these apply to adult development. Whether in gaming, television viewing, or music listening, both vicarious experiences and PSEs are recognized as having a profound effect on things like viewer aggression, emotional engagement, and fan behaviors.

The Dark Side of PSR: Erotomania, Stalking, and Celebrity Worship

Contrary to theories and research discussed in this chapter that examine PSEs from a normative perspective, underscoring their role in healthy adults, others have attempted to cast these experiences as a pathology. There are a number of important points to be made in a discussion of the potential relationships between PSE and pathology. Most importantly, less than 1% of studies and reports on stalkers and their victims dealt with celebrities' stalkers (Hoffman & Sheridan, 2008). However, in these rare instances when a celebrity is a victim of stalking, these high-profile cases get much publicity and, as a result, come to mind more frequently than might the stalkers of ordinary members of the public. In the 1980s in particular, John Hinkley, who stalked and shot Ronald Reagan; Mark David Chapman, who stalked and killed John Lennon; and Robert Bardo, who stalked and killed Rebecca Shaeffer, are cases that easily come to mind (Hoffman & Reid Meloy, 2008).

Erotomania and Stalking. Erotomania is a form of schizophrenia wherein the perpetrator believes that she or he is in a relationship with someone of higher status. Consistent with the delusional beliefs of all forms of schizophrenia, the mistaken belief is that the celebrity is the initiator of the relationship and that the relationship is a real one. A well-known case involved David Letterman and Margaret Ray, who stalked him, broke into his home, and most importantly, believed that she was his wife (McAnaney et al., 1992). This type of delusional belief is at the heart of erotomania. In both this case and in the case of John Hinkley mentioned above, the motivation behind stalking and other criminal behavior was this deep-seated delusion that the relationship was real.

But in most of the literature on stalking and attacking celebrities, the important point is that those who commit these acts have clear profiles of pathology and mental illness These perpetrators tend to be socially isolated and single, show signs of severe mental illness, and are out of touch with reality in general (Hoffman & Reid Meloy, 2008). A detailed analysis of this literature is beyond the scope of this chapter (see Reid Meloy et al., 2008, for an extended discussion of these matters).

Celebrity Worship. In the past 20 years, a construct called celebrity worship (CW) has been added to the discussion of PSEs. McCutcheon et al. (2002) began their research

with the creation of an instrument called the Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS; see Chapter 4). In this article and other early work about CW (Maltby et al., 2003, 2004; McCutcheon et al., 2004), three types of CW were described: social entertainment CW, intense personal CW, and borderline pathological CW.

First, social entertainment CW is really just normal fandom. "My friends and I like to discuss what my favorite celebrity has done" was one of the items for this type of CW on the CAS (McCutcheon et al., 2002, p. 73; Stever, 2011). For the other two types of CW, problems can occur. Intense personal CW is measured by items such as, "My favorite celebrity is my soul mate," and "If my favorite celebrity were to die, I wouldn't want to live" (McCutcheon et al., 2002, p. 73). This type of CW has been correlated with decreased cognitive flexibility (Maltby et al., 2003; Martin et al., 2003); problems with body image (Maltby et al., 2005); increased likelihood of seeking cosmetic surgery (Maltby & Day, 2011; Swami et al., 2009); and addiction and criminality (Sheridan et al., 2007). Research has also correlated intense personal CW with high levels of depression, anxiety, stress, negative affect, and illness (Maltby & Giles, 2008). A review of studies (Stever, 2011) found that in all samples, both general population and selected fandom samples, the intense personal celebrity worshippers represented 15%–20% of these samples, with fan samples looking no different from general population samples. In other words, there was nothing about members of organized fan groups that made them look any different from general population samples when talking about intense personal CW, and the same was true about the third category, borderline pathological CW.

Borderline pathological CW is characterized by a willingness to do whatever the celebrity might ask, even if it involves breaking the law. An example of this is the followers of Donald Trump (Gabriel et al., 2018), who were willing to storm the capital and attempt to block the lawful transfer of power on January 6, 2021 (Stever et al., 2022). Many of these celebrity worshippers were arrested, convicted, and sentenced to various prison sentences (Popli & Zorthian, 2022). Approximately 3%–5% of sampled populations have indicated some evidence of this type of CW (Stever, 2011).

Giles (2010), in addressing the connection between PSIs and CW, explained that a common confusion in the literature has been the treatment of PSI as a form of CW when, in fact, CW is a form or subcategory of PSI. This problem has resulted in some researchers in the fan studies research community completely discounting studies of fandom done by media psychologists, particularly those using either PSE or CW as applied to media fandoms. Couldry (2007) stated: "The anger I felt at the frequent pathologizing of fans' perfectly legitimate interpretative practice was one reason I avoided all trace of individual psychology in my analysis. I was trying to avoid what I saw as a reduction of such practice to the 'defects' of individual psyches" (p. 139).

Duffett (2013, 2014) has given the most extensive critique of PSI as it has been applied to fandom, and at the heart of his argument are concerns about CW and the statement made by McCutcheon et al. (2004) that fan clubs are made up of celebrity

worshippers. As mentioned above (Stever, 2011), data showed that a supermajority (80%) of the fans surveyed did not meet the criteria for either intense personal or borderline pathological CW. However, in the early CW literature, there was a tendency to use the terms "fan" and "celebrity worshipper" as synonyms, a tendency that has been corrected in more recent articles (e.g., Maltby & Day, 2017). But the original discussion of CW clearly established this idea that fan club members were all celebrity worshippers, and CW was a slippery slope to mental illness (McCutcheon et al., 2004). This assertion created the divide between psychologists and fan studies scholars as described above. Basing his argument on the CW construct, Duffett (2013) asserted that this work "uses fandom to explore the borderline between sanity and insanity" (p. 87).

Duffet's (2013) discussion of Horton and Wohl (1956) referred to the assertion made in their article that because PSIs and PSRs are one way, they create an unhealthy sense of connection to the media persona. This sets the stage for his rejection of work in PSE, CW, and similar studies that seem to pathologize fandom. In the case of PSEs, it would appear to be an application of the old cliché to throw out the baby with the bathwater, meaning that if PSI is a form of CW, and CW is a slippery slope to mental illness, then it is all pathologizing fandom and is bad.

But as was stated clearly by Giles (2010), PSE is not a form of CW; rather, CW is a type of PSE. Unfortunately, once the misunderstanding had been established, correcting it was a difficult prospect. There are clear data that CW creates mental health problems for many people, but the data are just as clear that this is not a characteristic of fans and occurs in 20% or less of all sampled populations, including fan samples (Stever, 2011).

Groszman (2020) discussed the connections between parasocial theory and fan studies and concluded that "parasocial theory, particularly the modern, scientifically tested version of Horton and Wohl's (1956) original framework is potentially quite relevant to fan studies" (p. 4). Applying parasocial theory to K-Pop fandom, she concluded the theory does not really pathologize fandom. There are only two cases where PSR is potentially pathological, one where it becomes a substitute for all in-person relationships and one where the person expects reciprocity where none can realistically be expected. This leads to the already discussed topics of erotomania and stalking.

Summary and Conclusions

The psychological connection one forms with another person or persons defines the realm of social psychology. All social connections involve communicating in some way with others, whether real or imagined. As a person develops across the life span, individual needs and social situations define the social connections that person forms.

The nature of the personae who populate the individual's social world is the result of a number of factors that include personality, the seeking of and need for comfort, the specific place one is in the life course, and the extent to which mediated sources of social support are present in that person's life.

Some of those with whom we interact are face-to-face others known to us in the real world. But a number of fictional and distant others populate our day-to-day lives as well. These include characters in books and television programs, celebrities known to us through various kinds of media, and various other people who are encountered from a distance. The relative importance of these various people is determined by individual differences in the needs, characteristics, and social situations of those persons. Understanding how PSEs contribute to the social life of people in a mediated world is an important part of both developmental and social psychology.

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PART IV

Applications of PS Experiences to Self and Social Life

CHAPTER

10

The Social Context of PSRs

Dara Greenwood *and* Alice Aldoukhov

Abstract

Despite being initially defined as a complementary extension of social life, parasocial relationships (PSRs)—imagined intimacies that audiences develop with media figures—have also been hypothesized to serve as a "functional alternative" to social life. The latter compensatory use of PSRs ostensibly addresses insufficient or unsatisfying social and emotional needs and is sometimes labeled the social surrogacy hypothesis. The present chapter reviews research on parasocial experiences (PSEs) in the context of media users' social and emotional life. The chapter focuses on the complex and sometimes contradictory relationships that PSEs have to loneliness, attachment anxiety, and belonging needs, and the small body of work that examines whether PSEs might actually gratify such needs is highlighted. Also considered are particular kinds of parasocial targets (i.e., romantic, identity relevant) and their implications for social and emotional well-being.

Key Words: loneliness, compensation, social surrogacy, attachment, romantic PSR

Introduction

Many people turned to media figures and programs to stave off the anxiety and isolation that the COVID-19 pandemic caused in 2020 (Bond, 2021). Some of us, however, tend to experience "parasocial closeness" (e.g., "My favorite media figure makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends," Rubin et al., 1985)—more regularly, absent a global pandemic. It is certainly intuitive to imagine that either structural deficits (i.e., sickness, marginalization) or socioemotional deficits (i.e., attachment anxiety, loneliness) in everyday functioning might lead us to lean more heavily on symbolic surrogate attachments. And indeed, in their original treatise of "para-social interaction," Horton and Wohl (1956) suggested that although such pseudo-relationships can be construed as extensions of normal social life, media figures may be "peculiarly favorable to the formation of *compensatory attachments* by the socially isolated, the socially inept, the aged and invalid, the timid and rejected" (p. 223, emphasis added). They were careful to underscore, however, that such remedial motivations are also natural, noting that individuals whose basic social

or emotional needs are not being met would be adaptively inclined to "seek sociability and love wherever they think they can find it" (p. 223).

But is this compensatory hypothesis supported by the empirical literature that followed decades later? Do individuals with social, emotional, or circumstantial deficits report stronger parasocial experiences (PSEs[1]) with favorite media figures than their more secure and fulfilled counterparts? Further, and importantly, do PSEs actually fulfill social and emotional needs (i.e., the gratifications part of the uses-and-gratifications equation)? The present chapter explores the current, complex answers to such questions.

Before delving into the nuts and bolts of the relevant literature on PSEs, it is important to highlight some basic methodological parameters or stumbling blocks of this area of work. Both PSE with favorite media figures *and* individual differences in relational styles and anxieties are almost exclusively assessed via self-report surveys, often in one-shot correlational studies. The good news is that we have a breadth of rich data that speak to the potential overlap between socioemotional tendencies and parasocial engagement. The bad news is that because of the dearth of experimental or longitudinal work in this area, we cannot draw many causal conclusions in either direction. In other words, given any evidence that emotional vulnerability and increased parasocial engagement tend to go hand in hand, it is difficult to know whether such engagement mitigates, reflects, or contributes to those vulnerabilities.

Another problem in the research literature has to do with a lack of standardized measurement—this is true not only for parasocial measures, which are often a customized mix and match of prior scales (a common criticism of the area [Dibble et al., 2016; Chapter 4 in this volume]), but also for psychological constructs such as attachment style or loneliness, which have been assessed in multiple ways over the last few decades. Further, PSR intensity is almost always defined in terms of feelings for a *particular* character that is chosen as a "favorite." Thus, it is not possible to differentiate individuals who might have a strong imagined connection to a specific character from those who might more regularly engage in PSRs with multiple characters at once or across time. A parasocial measure that captures a general *tendency* to experience PSRs would enable more nuanced parsing of chronic versus target-specific PSEs, such as Slater et al.'s (2018) measures of PSRs (see Box 4.13 (box in Chapter 4 "PSR With Characters and Performers")). Another such a measure is currently being developed by the first author.

With these caveats in mind and noted where relevant, we first review the scholarship on the relationship between PSEs and media users' psychological vulnerabilities. Next, we highlight the appeal and ostensible utility of particular kinds of parasocial targets, including research on romantic PSRs (also see Erickson, Chapter 8, of this volume).

Do Social, Emotional, and Structural Deficits Predict PSEs?

The following sections review the scholarship on whether and how PSEs are meaningfully linked to three basic and related psychological vulnerabilities, or needs, that have been the

focus of empirical inquiry: loneliness, insecure attachment styles (Bowlby, 1969; see also Chapter 9), and the need to belong (NTB; Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Loneliness and PSEs

Parasocial experiences were initially captured by a "viewing for companionship" motive for television use that emerged as part of the early "uses-and-gratifications" approach to media engagement (e.g., Rubin, 1979; "gratifications *sought*" would have been a more accurate term given the lack of experimental methodology). This motive, alongside many others such as "to pass the time" or "to be entertained," was an attempt to not only develop a typology for individuals' media use, but also to put the emphasis on an active audience—who were presumably making strategic decisions about the frequency and content of their TV viewing (Rubin, 2002). However, just knowing that companionship was a motive did not quite address the reasons *why* that might be so. Researchers later developed a more multidimensional scale to capture "parasocial relationships" (e.g., "I see my favorite [newscaster] as a natural, down-to-earth person" and "I like hearing the voice of my favorite [newscaster] in my home") that was assessed in concert with more psychologically relevant constructs such as loneliness (Rubin, et al., 1985). Although Horton and Wohl's (1956) contention that "extreme parasociality" might be reserved for the lonely and lovelorn feels intuitive and informed a substantive portion of parasocial investigation, as it happens, the link between loneliness and PSEs is inconsistent and complex.

The relationships between loneliness and PSEs seem to be complicated by imprecise measurements. For example, early work by Rubin et al. (1985) found that loneliness and parasocial interaction (PSI) were not directly associated with each other, among a predominantly female young adult sample, but each did predict increased "television reliance"—the likelihood of using television *when lonely* relative to other options, such as socializing with friends or reading a book. Thus, television viewing provided a potential strategy for offsetting current feelings of loneliness, perhaps indirectly due to the PSEs that accompanied it. Decades later, the distinction between temporary and more chronically experienced loneliness was illuminated in a study by Wang et al. (2008), who found that chronic loneliness was inversely correlated with the strength of PSRs with a favorite TV character (although for men, this pattern was reversed), but *transient* loneliness (e.g., "I don't feel lonely often but there are times I experience the feeling of emptiness") was positively correlated with PSR. It should be noted here, however, that even measures of ostensibly chronic loneliness are subject to some amount of interpretive ambiguity. The most commonly used measure (used by Wang et al., 2008) is a version of Russell et al.'s (1980) Revised UCLA (University of California–Los Angeles) loneliness scale, which focuses on the frequency with which individuals indicate experiencing items such as "I lack companionship" or "I feel isolated from others." Responses to these items do not actually allow the researcher to disentangle whether higher scores on this scale are of the more transient or chronic variety.

Mixed findings also emerged in work by the first author of this chapter, which found that the tendency to experience solitude as loneliness (i.e., feeling lonely or missing someone) was associated with increased PSRs, but so were more *positive* experiences of solitude that were characterized by self-expansion or diversion (Greenwood & Long, 2009). This work suggests that PSRs are appealing to those who experience time by themselves in both lonely relevant and nonlonely relevant ways.

In addition to the complexities of measurement, it is also important to think about complexities in sample populations. What of populations, such as older adults, whose social lives might be more structurally limited due to lack of mobility and who may have fewer "functional alternatives" to television use? Interviews with a predominantly female older adult sample (over age 60) on motivations for television viewing showed that "emotional loneliness" (e.g., "I often feel lonely") predicted viewing for companionship and social stimulation, as well as viewing "social entertainment" programs such as talk shows and sitcoms (Perloff & Krevans, 1987). Twenty years later, however, another study sampling older adults via survey found that loneliness was not associated with PSI with a favorite TV persona (real or fictional); however, the authors noted that the mean scores for loneliness were quite low (1.6 out of 4), so the sample as a whole was not at a socioemotional deficit (Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005). It is worth noting that although increases in loneliness tend to emerge in both midlife (50s) and late life (80s), experiences of loneliness are also quite high among the emerging adult population, as they navigate role and peer-based transitions (Hawkley et al., 2022). Understanding the developmental arcs of when and for whom loneliness is a salient experience is another integral nuance that would help clarify this body of work (see Stever's theorization of these questions in Chapter 9). Moreover, the kinds of PSRs that different-aged viewers form may also be confounded with technological shifts, as entertainment options proliferate in domains outside of traditional television formats.

Social media now provides users with potentially more interactive platforms on which to parasocially engage, calling into question the premise of an *illusory* or one-sided social relationship that defined PSE (see Chapter 3). "Live streamers" who play games, engage in creative pursuits, or even film "social eating" on various platforms such as Twitch or Facebook Live afford both video access and interaction with viewers via chat or specific mention during the stream. As such they are ripe for the development of PSEs—and its understudied close cousin, what we might term "quasi-social" engagement. They may also provide a more pragmatically appealing solution to loneliness than television because of their fundamentally more interactive format. Indeed, research has found that loneliness more reliably predicts PSRs with media figures on such interactive platforms (Baek et al., 2013; de Bérail et al., 2019; McLaughlin & Wohn, 2021).

One study found that both loneliness and extraversion predicted PSRs with live streamers (who were overwhelmingly male), along with the perceived "interpersonal attractiveness" or likeability of the streamer (McLaughlin & Wohn, 2021). Interestingly,

the researchers found that loneliness was inversely related to parasocial *interaction*—a distinction examined in the first section of this volume and defined as a perception of in-the-moment interaction with a media figure (e.g., "The streamer knows I'm there," modified from Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). This is a tricky construct to interpret in this context; however, in the case of a live streamer, there may well be an actual (albeit mediated) interaction between the viewer taking place. It is therefore impossible to determine whether the perception of presence is linked to an actual experience of receiving a personalized response in a chat, for example, or whether it is merely a symbolically felt experience.

Some work in this area links loneliness and PSEs with addictive tendencies on social networking sites or YouTube. Baek et al. (2013) sampled South Korean internet users and found that loneliness predicted following media figures on social networking sites, as well as social media addiction (e.g., "Frequently, I regret I consume too much time using SNS services"). De Bérail et al. (2019) found that loneliness, as well as social anxiety, predicted increased PSRs with a favorite YouTuber in an international sample, and that PSRs with YouTubers in turn predicted greater YouTube addictive tendencies (e.g., "How often do you neglect household chores to spend more time on YouTube?"). One explanation for these findings is that individuals with emotional vulnerabilities are drawn to parasocially engage with media figures on more interactive platforms ostensibly to manage those vulnerabilities, which in turn may snowball into *more* vulnerability, in this case in the form of addiction. Another explanation is that PSRs may be the psychologically "nourishing" part of the story that offsets some of the loneliness that these users experience. Toward that end, de Bérail et al. (2019) acknowledged the potential socioemotional benefits of social media–based PSRs and noted they might be harnessed to disseminate health messages to targeted populations, for example, or augment a therapy/client relationship.

An additional relevant artifact of the new ways in which we consume entertainment media is the possibility of binge-watching (watching multiple TV episodes in a short time frame). To the extent that this accelerated form of viewing has the potential to strengthen PSRs in a short time frame, it would also seem intuitively appealing to lonely individuals. However, although Tukachinsky and Eyal (2018) found binge-watching (or "marathon viewing" in their terminology) to be predictive of increased PSRs, it was not associated with loneliness. Interestingly, marathon viewing was predicted by other indicators of negative well-being, such as depression (included in the same regression block as loneliness). It is possible that more deeply rooted emotional tendencies, beyond the experience of loneliness (which is typically correlated with both depression and insecure attachment), are more strongly predictive of escapist TV viewing. And, similar to the choices of character for PSR measures, binge-watching may also be confounded with specific television *content*; Netflix has started using "binge-worthy TV shows" as a content category in itself that is meant to inform viewers as much if not more about the nature of the show itself than specific viewer motivations. Further, media critics have argued that some television shows are specifically designed to be consumed in this marathon fashion. In other words,

there may be qualitative differences in the kinds of narratives and character development that occur in binge-worthy shows that may facilitate a different kind of viewing experience compared to the experience of a paced consumption of episodes (Russell, 2015). Clearly there is nuance on both sides of this media use equation that needs further probing.

Finally, particular groups of lonely individuals may turn to PSRs more than others for the identity validation or community they provide. For example, recent research found that for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning) participants, loneliness and parasocial bonds were more clearly linked than for heterosexual participants (Bond, 2018; McCutcheon et al., 2021; Woznicki et al., 2021). Bond (2018) surveyed an adolescent population and found that loneliness was associated with PSRs for LGB youth but not heterosexual youth; moreover, LGB youth were more likely to choose media figures who shared their sexual identity. Bond (2018) argued that LGB youth may be strategically engaging in PSRs to compensate for a lack of real-life support (see also Chapter 14 in this volume). In support of this contention, related work found that stronger parasocial bonds with LGBTQ YouTubers among LGBTQ emerging adults (18- to 24-year-olds) living at home during the pandemic mitigated the relationship between low levels of family support and loneliness and between loneliness and depression (Woznicki et al., 2021).

Notably, only one study to date that we know of has assessed the impact of PSE on loneliness experimentally (Stein et al., 2022). Participants were asked to write about a favorite celebrity/fictional character, a "dearly beloved person," or do a control tasks focused on cognitive skill. Loneliness (along with mood and social self-esteem) was assessed before and after this manipulation. Only the social relationship condition significantly reduced loneliness relative to the parasocial or control conditions, although negative mood decreased for both social and parasocial conditions relative to the control task. Because the intensity of feelings for a "dearly beloved" individual may have overpowered those for a favorite character at the outset, the researchers also examined whether parasocial intensity predicted a decrease in loneliness; it did not (although it did predict an increase in social self-esteem relative to the control). They note, however, as others have, that the loneliness levels of the sample were relatively low to begin with and so did not have much room to drop as a result of intervention. One final caveat is that the loneliness scores for the social relationship condition were a bit higher than the others. It was not clear whether this difference was significant, but if so, this would be unfortunate for the benefit of random assignment and suggest another reason for the apparent reduction.

To summarize an unwieldy literature, the link between PSEs and loneliness, as documented by a recent meta-analysis (Tukachinsky et al., 2020), is less robust than it might intuitively seem; in fact, across 11 aggregated studies, no significant relationship between the two emerged. Where PSEs with media figures and loneliness *do* seem to be more consistently related are in the realm of social media platforms, which can provide actual in addition to illusory interaction and may enable lonely individuals to feel more socially engaged. As Wang et al. (2008) noted, in response to their lack of significant overall

findings between chronic loneliness and PSRs with a favorite TV character, college students have easy access to more "high-technology media" that may do a better job of addressing unmet social needs than television (p. 102). PSEs also seem to be more loneliness relevant when considering marginalized populations such as LGBTQ individuals for whom LGBTQ media figures may hold particular significance. Finally, and importantly, as noted previously, a distinction should be made between chronic versus temporary states of loneliness. To the extent that PSEs are associated with temporary loneliness, it may reflect a beneficial and strategic use of surrogate intimacy to manage temporary social or emotional deficits.

More "trait-based" constructs that are theorized to have deeper evolutionary roots such as attachment anxiety or heightened belonging needs, are typically associated with *both* loneliness and PSEs (Greenwood, 2008; Iannone et al., 2018). It is possible that PSEs are more uniformly appealing to those whose relational needs are chronically *activated*, which may render them more vulnerable to fluctuations in loneliness. It is to these individuals we turn next.

Attachment Style and PSEs

Research on the psychological motivations for imagined intimacy has benefited from research and theory on real-life intimacy needs and tendencies. One of the richest frameworks in this area of work is attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), which specifies that we have a fundamental and evolutionarily derived need to bond with close others. In childhood, those others are caregivers; close emotional bonds between parents and children confer clear benefits for the child with respect to both physical and emotional development. In adulthood, these bonds are potentially transferred to the realm of romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), and the need for fulfillment becomes more social and emotional in nature (although research shows that being partnered continues to confer various physical health benefits over the life span; Robles et al., 2014).

The particular secure and insecure attachment *styles* that are evidenced in adulthood are thought to derive at least in part from early experiences with caregivers. Parental relationships that are reliable and warm contribute to the development of a secure attachment style—characterized by low anxiety about and low avoidance of intimacy. However, inconsistently reliable or warm parenting or consistently unreliable or hostile parenting contributes to the development of insecure attachment styles. The former is thought to manifest in adults who are high on anxiety but low on avoidance of intimacy, classified as anxious ambivalent; these individuals tend to have a "hyperactivated" attachment system and need a lot of reassurance and attention to feel secure in their close relationships. Consistently unreliable parenting is thought to contribute to a dismissing avoidant attachment style, associated with a "deactivated" attachment system; excessive self-reliance in this case was ostensibly an adaptive response to neglect or hostility in childhood. Finally, researchers have distinguished a fearful avoidant category of attachment—those who experience both

anxiety and avoidance of intimacy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan et al., 1998). This style characterizes individuals who crave intimacy but fear rejection.

It is not surprising, perhaps, that researchers began applying real-life attachment patterns to a parasocial context. Would individuals whose intimacy needs are unmet, either because they are excessive (in the case of anxious ambivalent attachment) or because rejection anxiety prevents the development of intimate relationships (fearful avoidant), be most likely to engage in PSEs? Would those whose intimacy needs are fulfilled either by virtue of nourishing partnerships (secure) or by the pointed eschewing of such partnerships (dismissing avoidant) be less likely to seek fictional intimacy? Or, conversely, would PSEs be an *extension* of real-life intimacy needs, with more securely attached individuals seeking both real and ersatz companionship?

In one of the first empirical investigations on attachment style and PSEs, Cole and Leets (1999) found that individuals with an anxious ambivalent attachment style reported more intense PSRs than their avoidant counterparts. Interestingly, securely attached individuals fell nonsignificantly in between the other groups. Moreover, individuals who self-classified as secure but had higher scores on avoidant attachment on another measure also reported increased PSRs. The latter finding suggests that some combination of secure and avoidance might be particularly relevant to PSE. In particular, those who want intimate relationships but fear rejection may fall into this group. Evidence of the latter phenomenon was born out 20 years later in research by Silver and Slater (2019), who assessed general PSRs with favorite characters in movies and TV shows (e.g., "I like to imagine my favorite TV show or movie characters as people I know personally") in conjunction with adult attachment styles. They found that individuals scoring high on avoidance in general were less likely to experience PSRs, but those scoring high on avoidance in interaction with scoring high on anxiety—those in the fearful avoidant category—were more likely to experience PSRs, along with a host of related involvement measures (e.g., transportability, boundary expansion). The authors speculated that "there is an element of comfort in relationships with familiar characters and alternative realities to people whose lives are generally more stressful" (Silver & Slater, 2019, p. 3506).

David et al. (2019) also assessed what they termed "insecure avoidant" attachment (conceptually similar to fearful avoidant attachment) and anxious ambivalent attachment in the context of a newly devised scale designed to measure the relative closeness individuals felt toward a favorite media figure compared to their mother or father (e.g., "I feel closer to my favorite celebrity or persona than my mother/father") in addition to a broader parasocial scale (Celebrity-Persona Interaction Scale [CPI]; Bocarnea & Brown, 2007). Anxious ambivalent attachment styles predicted increased parental attachment with celebrities. Further, in contrast to findings by Silver and Slater (2019), insecure avoidant attachment was inversely predictive of general parasocial attachment. This would suggest that those who avoid intimacy in their daily lives also eschew parasocial forms of intimacy. However, it should be noted that David et al. (2019) did not look at

the standard interaction between avoidance and anxiety, and the questions were framed in terms of general close versus romantic close relationships. Other work just focused on attachment anxiety and avoidance separately have similarly found that attachment anxiety, but not avoidance, predicted PSRs with media figures (Greenwood, 2008; Greenwood & Long, 2011; Rain & Mar, 2021; Rosaen & Dibble, 2017). Measurement clarity would enable further elucidation of these relationships.

A study of older adults found that two combinations of relational tendencies/experiences moderated an inverse association between PSR strength and depressive symptoms (Bernhold & Metzger, 2020). Specifically, adults with high attachment anxiety but high-quality relationships and older adults with low attachment anxiety but low-quality relationships each showed an inverse relationship between PSRs and depressive symptoms. The authors speculated that PSRs in these cases are functioning to scaffold a real-world scenario that is partly deficient from a socioemotional standpoint. This research suggests that relational *circumstances* in addition to relational styles should be taken into account when assessing the role of PSRs. Along these lines, research by the first author found that individuals with high attachment anxiety who are also single (so their attachment needs are ostensibly at a particular deficit) reported increased imagined intimacy with favorite opposite-gender media figures (Greenwood & Long, 2011). Imagined intimacy in this case was operationalized by adapting an actual relationship scale comprising care, passion, and intimacy subscales for media figure targets (e.g., "In this relationship we *would* understand each other"). These data offer support for the possibility that parasocial engagement functions as both an extension of real-life preoccupation with relationships and a potential compensation for unmet emotional and social needs.

The above relationships were all assessed via cross-sectional correlational designs and so cannot speak to causality. A unique longitudinal design endeavored to capture shifts in "parasocial closeness" over four different times early in the pandemic, from April 2020 to June 2020. Bond (2021) asked participants to respond to various questions about face-to-face and mediated social contact with four different close friends as well as four different favorite media personae. He operationalized closeness at each time interval utilizing six items from Rubin et al.'s (1985) original measure (e.g., "[Name] makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend"). It is worth noting that this sample was not entirely isolated due to pandemic restrictions—90% were living with at least one other adult at the time of the study. Attachment anxiety was examined as a potential moderator of change over time. Results showed that PSRs increased over the time frame in question, and interestingly, this increase was strongest among those *low* in attachment anxiety. It was also stronger for those who increased mediated social contact and decreased actual face-to-face contact with close others. This research highlights the multidimensional way in which individuals use media figures as surrogate social contacts. In particular, increased time in isolation was associated with increased reliance on parasocial contacts, which suggests compensatory use is taking place. However, this effect was strongest for those who did *not* experience

anxiety in their close relationships, which is more aligned with complementary theories of PSEs. More longitudinal work is needed to probe this finding.

In sum, a decent body of work suggests that anxious attachment styles, with or without accompanying avoidant tendencies, are associated with stronger PSRs with favorite media figures. Exceptions remain, as always, and more innovative research methods are needed to continue probing the nature and, ultimately, the impact of such relationships for those with vulnerabilities in their relational lives.

Belonging Needs and PSEs

In addition to the primitive need for dyadic bonds, humans have a NTB to a group, which has also been conceptualized as "fundamental" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Not only are there broad social and emotional benefits to feeling like a valued group member (and conversely, major psychological vulnerabilities associated with exclusion; see Williams, 2007), but such status is theorized to have evolutionary roots; those who were positively embedded in a cooperative group likely had greater access to food, shelter, and safety. In addition to being considered a species-level motivation with clear benefits, individuals also fall along a continuum, as humans tend to do, with regard to which they experienced this particular need.

Not surprisingly, given their conceptual overlap, links between NTB and PSEs are fairly similar to those found between attachment anxiety and PSEs. Research has typically found a positive association between heightened belonging needs and PSEs (Greenwood & Long, 2009, 2011; Iannone et al., 2018; McNeil & DiTommaso, 2022; Rosaen & Dibble, 2016). For example, Greenwood and Long (2011) found that—analogous to the findings for attachment anxiety outlined previously—single college students with a high NTB were more likely to report imagined intimacy with opposite-gender media figures (in an exclusively heterosexual sample). Further, in recent work, McNeil and DiTommaso (2022) have found that NTB *mediates* the relationship between attachment anxiety and PSR for a favorite TV character; in other words, the heightened belonging needs that tend to be associated with attachment anxiety help explain individuals' investment in surrogate social relationships.

Related research by the first author found that *solitude focused on others* mediated the link between NTB and PSEs (Greenwood & Long, 2009). That is, those high in belonging needs were most likely to experience time alone in terms of belonging need activation, which in turn led to increased likelihood of engaging in PSEs to potentially gratify those needs. Whether such engagement actually soothes belonging needs is another question we return to further in this section. In cases where someone's socioemotional needs are not being met by their current circumstances, surrogate intimacy figures may be particularly appealing.

Seeking out PSRs via social media platforms appears to be more common among those with higher belonging needs, similar to the findings for loneliness. For example,

Iannone et al. (2018) found that individuals who are high in the NTB were more likely to report parasocial motives for following celebrities on Twitter (e.g., "Following celebrities on Twitter makes me feel closer to them"), and those high in NTB who were also high on chronic ostracism experiences followed more celebrities than those low on ostracism experiences. Some interesting experimental work has found that priming individuals with their own mortality increases an interest in fame or famous people (Greenberg et al., 2010). The authors noted that "in contemporary Western culture, fame seems to be a clear way to attain symbolic immortality" (p. 4). To the extent that death represents the ultimate exclusion scenario, fame may provide some amount of reassurance that one will remain indefinitely included in the human experience. Indeed, Greenwood et al. (2013) found that individuals with higher belonging needs are also more interested in fame (operationalized as visibility, status, and prosocial impact) than those with lower NTB. To the extent that fame fantasies involve having a network of celebrity peers, and to the extent that fame fantasies may incorporate the imagined meeting of favorite celebrities (an item included in various parasocial scales, "I would like to meet my favorite [media figure] in person"; Rubin et al., 1985), the link between belonging needs and fame interest may indirectly implicate parasocial motivations as well.

Do PSEs Fulfill NTB? Much of the above work on compensatory possibilities of parasocial engagement *presumes* a positive impact on the self, or at least a strategic attempt to manage emotional vulnerability. It is also possible that engaging with media figures in some way exacerbates belonging needs (consider someone high on belonging needs who finds themselves sitting alone on the couch with the television off at the end of the evening). Finally, it is possible that PSEs are merely reflective of heightened belonging needs. Research to date appears to indicate mixed or indirect effects, if any, of PSE on belonging needs. Further, as with the other research in this chapter, measurement differences permeate the small body of experimental work in this area.

Twenge et al. (2007) found that writing about a favorite TV character after a social exclusion threat (a bogus future prediction that the participant would end up alone in their life) resulted in marginally less aggressive behavior relative to a control condition (playing a noise-blast game against an opponent in a lab setting). No direct assessment of belonging as a potential mediator was included in the latter study; however, more recent work found no effects on feelings of belonging following writing about a favorite TV show, a best friend, or whatever was on TV (control) after an exclusion threat manipulation (Sacco et al., 2021). It is possible that merely writing about a favorite show did not activate parasocial feelings as strongly as writing about a favorite media figure might have. However, Derrick et al. (2009) found that after having one's relational security threatened (writing about an argument with a close other), and subsequently writing about a favorite TV show (vs. whatever is on) did in fact mitigate the negative effects of this manipulation on self-esteem, mood, and perceived rejection.

Individual differences may also be important to account for when examining the potential positive impact of PSEs. Though not directly focused on belonging needs, Derrick et al. (2008) found that when individuals with low self-esteem wrote about a favorite celebrity compared to a neutral celebrity, or a close friend/partner, they reported higher overlap between their actual and ideal selves. This relationship was mediated by an association between actual self and celebrity similarity, leading the authors to highlight that "low self-esteem people became closer to their ideal selves because they assimilated celebrities they perceived as embodying their ideal selves to their actual selves" (p. 275). It is safe to say that more work is needed to clarify whether and for whom parasocial reminders function to mitigate immediate or more chronically experienced threats to self.

In sum, heightened belonging needs and PSEs show a more consistent pattern of overlap than loneliness or even attachment anxiety do. However, more experimental work is needed to assess whether such needs are effectively assuaged via PSEs. Moreover, NTB is a construct that indicates a preoccupation with group-level inclusion experiences, but it does not differentiate among those whose heightened belonging needs are typically met versus unmet. As such, research findings may reflect parasocial engagement among sociable individuals who are typically able to meet their own affiliative needs and among those who are less adept at fulfilling them. More work is needed to merge the experimental work on activated belonging or rejection experiences with more chronically held individual differences in these areas.

Romantic Parasocial Relationships

Perhaps nowhere are attachment style, rejection, or loneliness more intensely experienced than in the context of romantic relationships. In fact, research in the area of social neuroscience has shown that similar brain regions are activated in response to the pain of romantic dissolution as in response to physical pain, presumably because of the evolutionary cost of interpersonal rejection. (Kross et al., 2011). We next turn to the special case of *romantic* PSRs and the extent to which they may compensate for or complement real-life relational needs. Even though Horton and Wohl (1956) clearly referenced anecdotal scenarios of both men and women professing romantic love for various media figures, and Caughey (1984) theorized the emotional allure and potential gratifications that such romantic attachments might provide ("the media love relationship is exquisitely tuned, not to the needs of the celebrity but to the needs of the self," p. 51), it took about 25 more years for measures of parasocial romantic relationships (PSRRs) to be conceptualized and developed (Erickson et al., 2018; Tukachinsky, 2011).

Measures of PSRR encompass both physical attraction ("I find X very physically attractive") and emotional attraction ("For me, X could be the perfect romantic partner") (Tukachinsky, 2011; also see Chapter 4 in this volume on measurement and Box 4.10 for the items verbatim). Such relationships are common in adolescence, particularly among teenage girls (Theran et al., 2010). For many young people, romantic fantasies about idealized media figures may be a normative and safe way to rehearse romantic relationships

and explore their sexuality, absent the risks of rejection or heartbreak (see also Chapter 8 in this volume). Interestingly, some evidence points to the idea that parasocial romances may continue even when one's relational means are ostensibly being met—for example, Tukachinsky Forester (2021) found that teenagers reported ongoing PSRRs even after they had begun dating. Arguably, however, such imaginary relationships may still provide socioemotional scaffolding or opportunities for social comparison for those exploring first romances, which may well be unstable or unsatisfying. As Tukachinsky Forester (2021) noted: "They do not substitute for a lack of relationships but respond to a need not satisfied by a boyfriend or girlfriend" (p. 57). PSRRs might be used to address temporary or chronic relational voids in a nonthreatening way. Whether such attachments ultimately activate *greater* longing or romantic loneliness is another question that needs answering with experimental and longitudinal work (the repeated refrain of this chapter).

Research finds that PSRRs may emerge in other times of social or emotional transition, beyond adolescence, which suggests they may continue to be strategically utilized for socioemotional purposes. For example, PSRRs may soften the transition to parenthood (Aubrey et al., 2018), and they have been documented in the context of recovering from a romantic loss (through breakup or death, Tukachinsky Forester, 2021). New mothers may enjoy the escapist fantasy that parasocial romance affords as a respite from fatigue and the demands of an infant. PSRRs may also provide a bridge back from the grief and guilt attending a widow with a specific emphasis on regaining a sense of sexual or romantic identity outside of the prior relationship. In some cases, showcasing the emotional overlap between the social and the parasocial, individuals may need time before being ready for even a parasocial romance, as a woman interviewed by Tukachinsky Forester (2021) said of her interest, post-divorce: "It may be that it has affected me not forming a crush on a male actor because I am so adamant that I do not want to deal with a man right now" (p. 87). In the latter example, PSEs were *complementary* of real-life goals, which in this case were to detach from romantic engagement in any capacity, including a media-derived romance. This also dovetails with research by Hu et al. (2022), which found that "romantic loneliness" was not related to PSRRs (assessed on Tukachinsky's 2011 scale) among women and was actually inversely related to PSRRs for men. That is, men who had higher romantic loneliness were less likely to report PSRR experiences. These results are challenging to interpret, however; the romantic loneliness scale did not distinguish among those who were single and unhappy about it and those who were partnered but dissatisfied with their relationship. Further, the relationship status of the sample was not reported. Clearer conceptualizations of constructs like loneliness (romantic or not; situational or chronic) are needed to understand the extent to which romantic PSRs intersect with or ameliorate actual socioemotional needs.

Also in favor of both the complementary *and* compensatory function of romantic PSRs, Adam and Sizemore (2013) found that the perceived benefits of romantic PSRs and real-life relationships were quite similar—contributing to well-being and happiness and decreasing loneliness. Conceivably, then, individuals form PSRRs seeking similar gratifications that are offered by real-life relationships. This interpretation is consistent with the

results of Liebers's (2021) two quasi-experimental studies that examined PSRRs in different settings (at the cinema and at home). She found that compared to moviegoers who were in a romantic relationship, single moviegoers reported more intense emotional and physical romantic attraction toward the actor (Liebers, 2021). In this case, viewers may be filling their romantic "bin" with ersatz experiences absent a real life partner. Together, these findings suggest that parasocial romance may be a beneficial way to manage unfulfilled relationship needs; however, more research is needed to clarify the potential impact of such engagement.

The Double Edge of Romantic PSRs

As social cognitive theory underscores, media models can teach viewers about social norms and ideals (Bandura, 2001). Indeed, relationships with media figures may act as a means of sexual socialization for adolescents by functioning as "sexual super peers" (Brown et al., 2005). Social norms around gender and sexuality, however, are rife with stereotypes and assumptions that may be limiting in addition to liberating. One pitfall of romantic PSEs is that they can foster unrealistic relationship expectations, which in turn can lead to disappointment when the high standards set by fantasy celebrities are not met by real relationship partners. A study of college students found that the intensity of emotional involvement with a media figure during adolescence was associated with unrealistic relationship beliefs, lower relationship satisfaction, and less favorable perceptions of a current romantic partner (Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018).

In addition to informing ideals, romantic PSEs may signify or contribute to relational vulnerabilities. Erickson and Dal Cin (2018) found that more intense attachments in adolescence were associated with increased relationship-contingent self-esteem (i.e., having one's self-esteem rise and fall in step with relational experiences), increased negative evaluations of sexual experience, and an increased likelihood of experiencing passionate love. These findings are correlational; it may be that a third variable (attachment style?) predicts a heavier reliance on PSRRs as well as more disillusion or anxiety about real-life relationships.

Parasocial romantic relationships can blossom with figures from a variety of media platforms, so while the most widely studied PSRs have been with celebrities and television characters, video games also offer opportunities for parasocial romance. Song and Fox (2016) found that Chinese women's PSRs with characters in a romantic video game was correlated with holding more idealized and unrealistic beliefs about romance (Song & Fox, 2016). Another survey of Chinese women playing dating simulators revealed that PSRs with male romantic targets predicted both increased idealized beliefs about romance, but also more gender-egalitarian attitudes about dating norms (Yi, 2022). It would be important to understand the selective use of such games and the motivations for playing; interestingly, although the majority of women in the latter study were single, about a third were in relationships or married. It would also be important to understand

the causal relationships among these variables to better clarify the contributions that such gameplay and its associated PSRs play in the development of romantic expectations.

In addition to potentially contributing to stereotyped or idealized views of relationships, PSRRs can be a source of heartache when they interfere with real-life relationships. One exploratory study found that people can experience their partner's PSRR as a form of infidelity, which can be as hurtful as other forms of infidelity (Adam, 2019). While Adam's (2019) research demonstrated that media figures can be seen as romantic rivals threatening one's nonmediated romantic relationship, Tukachinsky Forster (2022) documented the opposite process, wherein real-life celebrity romantic relationships can be experienced as a threat to one's PSRR. Specifically, she found that some media users are jealous when a celebrity they have romantic feelings toward becomes romantically involved with someone else. Interestingly, Tukachinsky Forster (2022) found that a preoccupied attachment style, which predicts increased romantic jealousy in real life relationships, also predicts greater parasocial jealousy. This is another example of a how relationships media figures may *complement* real-life tendencies and underscores the extent to which romantic PSRs might feel all too emotionally real, either to an existing relationship partner or to the person engaging in PSRRs.

In sum, the research on PSRRs illuminates the versatility of imagined intimacy to both reflect existing desires and circumstances and address deficits or dissatisfaction in the area of real-life romance. Further, the targets of parasocial romantic attachments and the messaging about gender and sexuality that accompany such targets require ongoing interrogation for the potentially problematic or empowering norms and ideals they depict.

Which Parasocial Targets?

Finally, when considering social motivations and psychological correlates of PSEs, it is important to consider the *kinds* of characters to whom individuals tend to attach. Chapters 13 and 18 in this volume discuss how media users are drawn to characters that share their social identity. This is especially true for audience members with marginalized group identities, such as LGBTQ individuals and people of color (e.g., Hall, 2022). Beyond social identity congruence, some work has endeavored to explore whether individuals with anxious attachment are more likely to choose characters who embody more confident characteristics to which they might aspire or whether their character choices might reflect the viewers' own insecurities (MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2021). Interestingly, those with anxious attachment styles were more likely to rate their chosen characters high on traits associated with anxiety such as apprehension and tension anxiety. On the darker side of the correlational coin, it is possible that connecting with anxious characters might reinforce viewers' own anxious tendencies by way of modeling or validation or both. However, there is reason to believe that particular characters may also *help* viewers navigate their own or others' anxieties in a more positive way. For instance, fans of the television show *Monk* (a hybrid comedy–drama focused on a man with obsessive compulsive

disorder [OCD]), who had a personal experience with OCD, reported that viewing *Monk* made them feel better about themselves. However, curiously, the reported intensity of PSRs with Monk was unrelated to OCD experiences. This finding suggests that the appeal of Monk was more widespread than individuals for whom that particular mental health struggle was salient (Hoffner & Cohen, 2012).

It is worth noting that PSEs with specific kinds of characters may also be alluring for individuals who exhibit antisocial tendencies. For example, Black et al. (2019) found that Machiavellianism (e.g., “I like to use clever manipulation to get my way”; Jones & Paulhus, 2014) predicted liking of “dark fictional characters,” and Greenwood et al. (2021) found Machiavellianism predicted increased PSR with a favorite antihero character. Such affinities may at best reflect a natural draw toward self-relevant characters, which, in the case of violent or morally dubious characters, may reify or glamorize antisocial qualities. As with other research on this area, more experimental and longitudinal work is needed to explicate the benefits and drawbacks of these symbolic emotional attachments.

Conclusion

The chapter started with two questions: Do individuals with social, emotional, or structural deficits report stronger parasocial attachments to favorite media figures than their more socially and emotionally fulfilled counterparts? And, do PSRs actually *fulfill* social and emotional needs? The short answer to the first question is a qualified yes. The answer to the second question is possibly, and an ongoing rallying cry for more experimental and longitudinal work to help clarify whether and for whom this is the case. In general, and with some key exceptions and ambiguity, there is a tendency for individuals with some amount of emotional vulnerability, whether due to their own relational tendencies, their external circumstances, or their identities, to report greater PSRs with favorite media figures.

Ultimately, however, the story of who engages in symbolic social and emotional interactions with media figures is multiply determined and complex (as most human phenomena tend to be!). As shown in the literature reviewed in this chapter, study results are often inconsistent, qualified by different moderating variables, or depend on the measures used to assess these constructs. Table 10.1 shows the diversity of measures used to assess links between parasocial experiences and psychological well-being in survey studies.

Clearer conceptualization of particular constructs, from loneliness to PSEs, is needed to come to more solid conclusions in this area of work. For example, the relatively recent and ever-evolving landscape of interactive media platforms has also changed the nature of PSRs in ways that appear to afford more opportunities for intimacy (with unclear outcomes) and merit updates to our current notions of “imagined” intimacy. As noted earlier, some type of “quasi-parasocial” measure may be needed to adequately capture these

Table 10.1 Studies on PSEs and Psychological Well-Being			
Citation	Sample	Parasocial Experiences Measure(s)	Psychological Measure(s)
Bernhold & Metzger (2020)	Older adults recruited via MTurk	The Virtual Friendship Scale (Hartmann et al., 2008)	The Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised scale (Fraley et al., 2000)
Bond (2021)	Adults recruited online	6 items from Rubin et al.'s (1985) PSI-Scale	Anxious attachment. Attachment Styles Scale (Feeney & Noller, 1992).
Chory-Assad and Yanen (2005)	Older adults (ages 55–88)	10-item PSI-Scale (Rubin, 1994); 9 items from the Audience-Persona Interaction Scale (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000)	20-item Revised UCLA Loneliness scale (Russell et al., 1980)
Cohen (1997)	U.S. college students, favorite character	10-item PSI scale (Perse & Rubin, 1987)	18-item Collins and Read (1990) Adult Attachment Scale (AAS)
Cohen (2004)	Quota sample of Israeli Jews	10-item PSI scale (Perse & Rubin, 1987) 8-item Parasocial Breakup (PSB) Scale	Single-item measure of attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987)
Cole and Leets (1999)	Undergraduate students	Items adapted from Rubin et al.'s (1985) PSI-Scale and Auteur's (1992) Parasocial Interaction Scale	Attachment Style Scale (Feeney & Noller, 1992)
David et al. (2019)	Adults recruited on MTurk	Celebrity-Persona Parasocial and Identification Scale (Bocarnea & Brown, 2007).	Revised Adult Attachment Scale—Close Relationships Version (Collins, 1996)
de Bérail et al. (2019)	Adults recruited online; primarily students, majority French	10-item PSI Scale (Rubin & Perse, 1987; Rubin et al., 1985)	The Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991); 3-item version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Hughes et al., 2004; Russell, 1996)
Escalas and Bettman (2017)	U.S. residents (only females in Study 1A)	Parasocial Relationship Scale (Rubin et al., 1985)	10-item Need to Belong Scale (NTB) (Leary et al., 2013)
Eyal & Cohen (2006)	U.S. college students	5 items from Rubin et al.'s (1985) PSI-Scale and 13 items adapted from Cohen's (2003) Parasocial Breakup (PSB) Scale	20-item Revised UCLA Loneliness scale (Russell et al., 1980)
Greenwood & Long (2009)	Undergraduate students	Parasocial Interaction Scale (Cole & Leets, 1999, adapted from Rubin et al., 1985)	Solitude (Long et al., 2003), 10-item NTB scale (Leary et al., 2007)

(*continued*)

Table 10.1 Continued			
Citation	Sample	Parasocial Experiences Measure(s)	Psychological Measure(s)
Greenwood & Long (2011)	Undergraduate students	12-item version of the Relationship Rating Form (Fraley & Davis, 1997), adapted for media figures	10-item NTB scale (Leary et al., 2007); 36-item Experiences in Close Relationships measure (ECR) (Brennan et al., 1998)
Hu et al. (2022)	Chinese students	Tukachinsky's (2011) Parasocial Love (PSL) scale measuring romantic PSRs	Romantic loneliness subscale from short version of the Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults (SELSA; DiTommaso et al., 2004).
Hwang & Zhang (2018)	Posted online for Chinese users of Weibo	6 items from Kim et al. (2015) (adapted from Levy, 1979; McGuire, 1974; Park & Yang, 2010; Rubin & Perse, 1987)	Loneliness 3 items from Pittman & Reich (2016)
Iannone et al. (2018)	Undergraduate students	10 questions assessing participants' PSRs with celebrities on Twitter	10-item NTB Scale (Leary et al., 2013)
Lim & Kim (2011)	U.S. adults aged 60+, recruited through an online panel survey company	Modified version of Levi's (1979) 7-item PSI scale	8-item version of Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (adapted from Russell et al., 1980)
MacNeill & DiTomasso (2022)	Adults recruited on Mturk	13-item PSR scale adapted from Hartmann et al. (2008)	10-item NTB (Leary et al., 2013); ECR, Attachment Anxiety subscale only, (Brennan et al., 1998)
McCutcheon et al. (2021)	Heterosexual and LGBTQ+ Filipino adults	23-Item Celebrity Attitude Scale (McCutcheon et al., 2002)	5-item adaptation of the Revised UCLA Loneliness scale (Hughes et al., 2004)
McLaughlin & Wohn (2021).	Adults recruited on Facebook, Reddit, and online forums	15 items from Rubin et al.'s (1985) PSI -Scale	20-item Revised UCLA Loneliness scale (Russell et al., 1980)
Rain & Mar (2021)	Undergraduate students	PSI (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011); PSR (Cole & Leets, 1999)	Attachment Style Questionnaire (Feeney et al., 1994).
Rosaen & Dibble (2016)	Undergraduate students	13-item PSR Scale (Hartmann, et al., 2008)	The 36-item ECR scale (Brennan et al., 1998); 20-item UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996); 10-item NTB scale (Leary et al., 2013)

Table 10.1 Continued			
Citation	Sample	Parasocial Experiences Measure(s)	Psychological Measure(s)
Rosaen & Dibble (2017)	Undergraduate students	13-item PSR (Hartmann et al., 2008); Multiple PSR- Scale (Tukachinsky, 2011) 17-item Celebrity Worship Scale (McCutcheon et al., 2002)	36-item ECR-R (Fraley et al., 2000); 20-item UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996)
Rubin et al. (1985)	Evening students at university	20-item PSI Scale (original scale)	The Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1980)
Silver & Slater (2019)	National quota sample recruited from Qualtrics	PSR Scale (Slater et al., 2018)	12-item short form of ECR (Wei et al., 2007)
Tukachinsky & Eyal (2018)	Undergraduate students	4 items from Rubin & Perse's 20-item PSI Scale (1987)	Single-item Attachment Style measure (Hazan & Shaver, 1987); 9 items from the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996)
Tukachinsky Forster (2022)	Online snowball sample (Study 2)	Parasocial Love Scale (PSL; Tukachinsky Forster, 2011)	Attachment scale (Guerrero, 1998)
Wang et al. (2008)	Undergraduate students	10-item PSI -Scale (Rubin & Perse, 1987)	Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale (Cramer et al., 2000); Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996); Situational loneliness; Transient loneliness
Woznicki et al. (2021)	LGBTQ emerging adults recruited via Prolific	The Friendship-Support subscale of the Multiple-Parasocial Relationships Scale (Tukachinsky, 2011)	3-item Loneliness Scale (Hughes et al., 2004)

developments. Further, more methodological diversity is needed to clarify when and for whom imaginary media bonds may be nourishing, neutral, or harmful.

Although it is a natural human tendency to focus on the negative (after all, negative experiences are the ones that need correcting or mitigating), the relatively recent field of positive psychology also encourages us not to underestimate the constructive and resilient ways in which we navigate our social and emotional lives. For example, fandom, which can be viewed as a variation on the PSE theme, has been linked to increased well-being in part due to the positive relationship between social interactions among fans and relational well-being (Vinney et al., 2019; see Chapter 9 for review). Such perceived identity benefits are particularly prevalent among sexual and gender minority youth (McInroy & Craig,

2020). Thus, PSRs can have positive effects on psychological well-being through fandom identity gratifications and connection to the fandom community (also see Chapter 11 about fandom and identity). Ideally, research on PSEs should help clarify the kinds of characters or media figures that may confer positive and productive psychological outcomes, in conjunction with their own needs and circumstances.

Note

1. In recent decades, researchers have taken pains to distinguish parasocial interaction (parasocial engagement that occurs *in the moment* of viewing and includes a perception that the media figure knows the viewer is there) and parasocial relationships (broader feelings of friendship that are cultivated over time with a particular performer). Chapters 1, 2, and 3 discuss these more in detail. For the purposes of this chapter, we use parasocial experiences (PSEs) to talk more broadly about the phenomenon, and use parasocial relationships (PSRs) or parasocial interaction (PSI; since modified to be the EPSI-Experience of Parasocial Interaction scale, Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011) where specifically relevant.

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CHAPTER

11 How Parasocial Relationships Affect Our Self-Concepts

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Abstract

The chapter surveys the effects of parasocial relationships (PSRs; one-sided relationships with media figures, including celebrities and fictional characters) on individuals' self-concept, self-esteem, and self-discrepancies. The chapter begins by examining the effects of PSRs on self-esteem and body esteem. After reviewing the literature in these areas, the chapter explores how people use self-expanding properties of PSRs to regulate affect and other unpleasant states. Finally, it explores some potential areas for future research. Special attention is given to the effects of PSRs on body image. The chapter reviews evidence of both problematic and protective consequences of PSRs for media users' mental health and psychological well-being.

Key Words: self-esteem, body-esteem, self-concept, assimilation effect, contrast effect

Introduction

People love celebrities, and the modern world provides ample opportunity to intertwine our lives with theirs. Whereas once people had to wait for monthly magazines to give them carefully curated glimpses into the lives of their favorite celebrities, now people can get that information quickly, frequently, and from many sources. People follow celebrities on Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and various other social media platforms. They can see daily pictures and stories, as well as get intimate insights into celebrities' personal lives. In addition, people not only can read about their favorite characters in books but also can read unlimited amounts of fan fiction, play video games in which they inhabit the worlds (and avatars) of their favorite characters, and even visit theme parks dedicated to re-creating the worlds of their favorite characters. The ubiquitousness of celebrities and popular fictional characters in our society begs the question: How does this constant contact affect how people think and feel about themselves?

The current chapter examines the effects of parasocial relationships (PSRs), or one-sided relationships with media figures, including celebrities and fictional characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956), on the self. We begin by examining the effects of PSRs on self-esteem and body esteem. After reviewing the literature in these areas, we explore

how people use self-expanding properties of PSRs to regulate affect and other unpleasant states. Finally, we explore some potential areas for future research.

The Effects of Parasocial Relationships on the Self

Parasocial Relationships and Self-Esteem

In this section, we review five ways that PSRs may affect self-esteem. Specifically, we examine how PSRs may increase self-esteem by (1) allowing people to assimilate the characteristics of the parasocial partner; (2) increasing self-efficacy; (3) fostering a sense of belonging; (4) boosting perceived relational value; and (5) providing people with a link to others who share their PSR. Whereas some of the research reviewed here experimentally examined the effects of PSRs on self-esteem, most of the research is less direct. Some does not directly assess PSRs but related constructs; some does not directly assess self-esteem but related constructs; and some relies on correlations instead of experiments. We review all of this work because, together, we believe that it presents a compelling story of PSRs affecting self-esteem.

Assimilation of Positive Attributes. At first glance, the increased access to celebrities brought about in the modern world seems like a terrible self-esteem and mood-destroying new reality. After all, most celebrities are physically attractive people with wealth and luxury; they share pictures of themselves looking perfect and enjoying the high life with equally perfect romantic partners. One could easily hypothesize that exposing oneself—all day, every day—to the lives of celebrities would inevitably be bad for our self-perceptions. It is a wonder that people do not scroll through Instagram in the fetal position.

Assuming that one would be devastated when reading about a celebrity who is more beautiful, successful, and happy than one contains an implicit assumption about the nature of social comparisons with the celebrities. It assumes that one looks at celebrities and compares, or contrasts, themselves to them. For example, seeing how beautiful Emma Watson is may make people feel bad about themselves because they compare their looks to her looks and thus feel badly about their physical appearance. Comparing oneself to a standard and then shifting self-perceptions away from the standard is called a contrast effect (Kahneman & Miller, 1986), and it often happens when one compares oneself to a stranger (Schwarz & Bless, 1992).

However, contrasting the self to others is only one way to react to a comparison standard. The other possible reaction is to assimilate the person to the self (e.g., Brown et al., 1992). For example, when a neighbor wins Olympic gold, if one compared their own physical abilities to that of their Olympic athlete neighbor, the individual would feel bad. However, in most cases, a layperson does not engage in a contrast effect with a local Olympic medalist. Instead, when their neighbor wins Olympic gold, people tend to feel proud and happy. This is why people brag about the accomplishments of those they are connected to. It is why people feel good when someone they know does well. This is

an assimilation effect; the other person's accomplishment has been assimilated to the self (Brown et al., 1992). The existence of both contrast and assimilation effects suggests that celebrities can potentially have opposite effects on thoughts and feelings about the self, depending on whether they are contrasted or assimilated to the self.

There are many things that determine whether contrast or assimilation occurs, but a key factor is the nature of the relationship to the target. Specifically, when the perceiver has a close, intimate relationship with the target, assimilation effects are likely to occur (Aron et al., 1991). However, when the target is not close to the perceiver, contrast effects become more likely (Dijksterhaus et al., 1998). For example, when evaluating their performance on a novel task, people tend to assimilate the performance of a close friend but contrast the performance of an acquaintance (Pelham & Wachsmuth, 1995). This is likely because we link—or include—close others to the self (Aron et al., 1991). Therefore, we are more likely to include their traits in our self-concepts. In summary, there is converging evidence that relationship closeness moderates the tendency to assimilate versus contrast social comparison targets. This suggests that PSRs may strongly affect the impact that celebrities have on the self. Because PSRs tend to be cognitively represented like real close relationships (Gabriel et al., 2016), having a PSR with a celebrity should increase the likelihood of assimilation and decrease the likelihood of contrast.

Consistent with the idea that people assimilate the characteristics of celebrities with whom they have PSRs, research suggests PSRs can bring people closer to their ideal selves. In a series of studies, Derrick et al. (2008) examined the role of same-gender PSRs in the reduction of discrepancies between one's current and ideal self for people with low self-esteem. Individuals with low self-esteem tend to have large discrepancies between who they are and who they want to be (Baumeister, 1998). Indeed, a key component of high self-esteem is having small self-discrepancies—viewing the actual self as similar to one's ideals for oneself (Baumeister, 1998). Thus, low self-esteem individuals (unlike individuals with high self-esteem, who are already content with themselves) are motivated to find ways to increase their self-esteem, making them ideal participants for studies examining changes to self-discrepancies. Study 1 found that individuals with low self-esteem perceived similarity between their ideal self and their favorite celebrity. That similarity predicted how much they liked the celebrities. In other words, people who were low in self-esteem were attracted to celebrities who embodied the traits they wanted for themselves. Although Study 1 showed that people are drawn to celebrities who *could* help their self-esteem, the choice of an aspirational celebrity could still be detrimental if the celebrity posed a threat on their self-concept. Study 2 examined that possibility.

Study 2 had participants write for 6 minutes about a celebrity they admired or a control celebrity prior to measuring actual–ideal self-discrepancies. Results revealed that exposure to one's admired celebrity (as opposed to a control celebrity) led individuals with low self-esteem to see themselves as more similar to their ideal selves. In other words, PSRs led low self-esteem participants to view themselves more positively. Study 3 followed a

similar procedure, but also included a condition in which participants were instructed to reflect on a social relationship with their romantic partner or close friend. Results showed that exposure to a favorite celebrity (but not a romantic partner or friend) led low self-esteem individuals to become more similar to their ideal selves. Further, this effect was mediated by assimilation of the celebrity to the self. Specifically, participants saw their actual self as more similar to their ideals for themselves and this was caused by seeing their self-concepts as more similar to the celebrities (i.e., assimilating them to the self). In other words, exposure to a favorite celebrity made people view themselves as similar to that celebrity, which in turn reduced actual–ideal self-discrepancies. Although they did not measure PSRs per se, these studies provide compelling evidence that PSRs with celebrities can increase self-esteem via assimilation of traits. In addition, these studies suggest they can be more effective than friends.

Assimilation of Self-Efficacy. Another mechanism through which assimilation can enhance self-esteem is by increasing self-efficacy—confidence in one's ability to achieve one's goals (Bandura, 1977, 1997). The effect of PSRs on self-efficacy has been consistently demonstrated in the context of adoption of health behaviors. For instance, Phua (2014) found that PSRs with weight loss spokespeople were associated with higher self-efficacy regarding diet and exercise. Similarly, Y. Tian and Yoo (2015) found that PSRs with contestants on *The Biggest Loser* (a television show about extreme weight loss) were more likely to feel as though they were also in control of their weight loss and had high exercise self-efficacy. Rasmussen and Ewoldsen (2016) found that PSRs with Dr. Phil—the host of a talk show about mental health—promoted viewers' self-efficacy to seek mental health treatment for themselves and their children.

Similar effects of PSRs on self-efficacy were found in other contexts. For example, Hoewe and Sherrill (2019) found that PSRs with strong female political leader characters on shows like *Madam Secretary*, *The Good Wife*, and *Scandal* were associated with higher political self-efficacy. In summary, PSRs can make one feel confident in one's ability to achieve one's goals, which is a key component of self-esteem. Thus, self-efficacy is another possible route by which PSRs can increase self-esteem.

Belongingness. In addition to increasing self-esteem by allowing people to assimilate the traits of celebrities, PSRs can also increase self-esteem by fostering a sense of belonging. Social rejection generally leads to decreases in self-esteem (Williams, 2009). However, PSRs can protect people from rejection-related decrements to self-esteem by bolstering belonging. In one of the first empirical examinations of this hypothesis, Derrick and colleagues (2009) found that for individuals with low self-esteem, exposure to their favorite television shows (which supposedly entail stronger PSRs with characters) provided the experience of belonging, which in turn mitigated social threats to their self-esteem (see also Chapter 10).

Knowles (Knowles, 2013; Knowles & Gardner, 2012) provided a more direct test of this by examining the effect of particular characters (rather than a television show). In a

series of studies (Knowles, 2013; Knowles & Gardner, 2012), participants relived a rejection through rewriting about it and then wrote about a favorite television character or a control topic (i.e., favorite hobby, favorite friend, or favorite travel destination). Next, participants were assessed on a variety of negative outcomes that commonly occur in response to social rejection, including lowered self-esteem. Results of these studies suggested that exposure to a favorite television character buffered against decrements to cognitive performance (i.e., solving math problems), self-esteem, and mood. In addition, favorite characters bolstered individuals' feelings of belonging, which mediated the effect of television characters on mood. Following an actual social exclusion, individuals who were exposed to a favorite television character (as opposed to a control character) were less likely to inflate the meaningfulness of their ingroup (a self-protective cognitive response to rejection), suggesting their belonging needs were fulfilled by the favorite character. Similarly, Twenge et al. (2007) found that thinking about favorite celebrities alleviated aggressive behavioral tendencies that occur following social exclusion.

Of note, Twenge and colleagues (2007) found equally strong effects for celebrities and friends, whereas Derrick and colleagues (2008) found stronger effects for celebrities on the self. We suspect that this may be due to the populations examined. Twenge and colleagues (2007) did not separate participants based on self-esteem, whereas Derrick and colleagues (2008) only examined low esteem individuals. Individuals with low self-esteem have a difficult time trusting that their close friends and romantic partners will not reject them (Murray et al., 2002). This leads them to create distance between the self and the close friends and relationship partners (Murray et al., 2000). Therefore, we would expect that studies examining just low self-esteem individuals (e.g., Derrick et al., 2008) would find that parasocial partners—who can't reject them—would be able to merge with the self more than close friends and romantic partners. Conversely, studies that don't specifically target low self-esteem participants (e.g., Twenge et al., 2007) may not detect that difference. Despite the important difference in the findings, all of these studies suggest that PSRs with fictional characters from television shows and celebrities can protect against the negative effects of rejection (on self-esteem) by increasing feelings of belongingness.

Perceived Relational Value. PSRs may also increase self-esteem by boosting people's perceived relational value, or social self-worth. Self-esteem is highly related to the feelings of acceptance by others (e.g., Leary, 2012). Therefore, increasing the feelings of acceptance by others (i.e., relational value) is a pathway to increase self-esteem. C. M. Brown et al. (2015) examined how others' acceptance and rejection of favorite media entities (e.g., television shows, musicians) influenced perceived relational value and self-esteem. In an initial study, participants were asked to recall a time when a close other told them they liked or disliked a favored media personality or did not engage in recollection (control) prior to reporting their current self-esteem. Individuals whose media entity was liked experienced a boost to their self-esteem, whereas those whose media entity was disliked experienced a drop in self-esteem. In a subsequent study, participants were led to believe

their favorite television show was well liked (accepted), not well liked (rejected), or neither (control) by other students at the university. Participants then completed a measure assessing basic need satisfaction (i.e., the extent to which needs for self-esteem, belonging, control, and meaningful existence were satisfied at the moment). Results revealed that others' acceptance of a favorite television show led to increased satisfaction of self-esteem needs. In other words, learning that others share appreciation of PSRs may boost one's perceived relational value, which leads to increased self-esteem.

Identification With a Fandom as a Mechanism. With the increased accessibility to all kinds of groups on the internet, people can (and do) engage with fandoms regularly, and these fandoms can provide a social identity similar to other social identities (Groane & Hettinger, 2016). In other words, people can feel a bond with others who share their same parasocial bonds (e.g., the Bey Hive group of Beyonce fans), which can lead to increased self-esteem. Research suggests that membership in fan communities enhances enjoyment, appreciation, physiological reactions, knowledge acquisition, and intentions to seek fan-related materials (Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2017). Identifying with others who share a PSR is associated with social well-being and social connection (Wann & Weaver, 2009). Similarly, higher fan identity is associated with higher relational well-being (Vinney et al., 2019). Although none of these studies have examined self-esteem, it seems likely that these increases in social well-being would, in turn, lead to increases in self-esteem (Baumeister, 1998). Future research may want to directly explore that relationship. In summary, research on identifying with a fandom suggests that PSRs may lead to positive feelings about the self via the relational self-esteem provided by feeling connected to other people who share the same PSR.

Taken together, these studies provide strong support for the idea that PSRs can affect self-esteem and that they can do it via multiple avenues. The following section discusses one particular context of such effects.

Parasocial Relationships and Body Esteem

One area where celebrities receive a great deal of scrutiny is in the domain of body image. Indeed, there are long-standing concerns in popular culture and the scientific community that celebrities inevitably have harmful effects on body image. For example, watching Taylor Swift's latest music video may make women feel bad about their own bodies because they feel heavier after comparison to her thin physique. Indeed, the majority of the research examining the effects of media figures on body image points to contrast effects (see Barlett et al., 2008, and Grabe et al., 2008, for meta-analytic reviews).

Specifically, PSRs have a negative impact on body image. For example, Z. Brown and Tiggemann (2016) found that higher levels of celebrity worship were associated with elevated body dissatisfaction among women exposed to celebrities. Additionally, greater wishful identification with a favorite female television character has been associated with heightened body shame and body surveillance (D. Greenwood, 2009; D. N. Greenwood

& Dal Cin, 2012). Adolescents may be especially likely to display the harmful consequences of PSRs. For instance, Maltby et al. (2005) found a relationship between celebrity worship for intense–personal reasons and attention to body shape among adolescent girls (but not boys/men or women). There is also evidence suggesting that the association between favored celebrities and poor body image among adolescents is due, in part, to social comparisons with PSRs (Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013; Te'eni-Harari & Eyal, 2015).

Multiple studies have also demonstrated unfavorable outcomes for disordered eating attitudes and behaviors. For instance, Harrison (1997) found that higher levels of interpersonal attraction to thin media figures predicted greater eating disorder symptomatology among women. Furthermore, women who experienced a greater discrepancy between their own body and their favorite celebrity's body were more likely to report anorexic and bulimic tendencies (Shorter et al., 2008). Aruguete et al. (2014) also found that men who worshiped celebrities to a greater extent were more likely to exhibit eating disorder symptomatology. Overall, these studies suggest that individuals fall short in their comparisons to PSRs, causing them to feel bad about their own bodies and engage in disordered eating habits.

PSRs have also been examined within the context of cosmetic surgery acceptance, with results continuing to suggest their connection to negative outcomes. In one study, Swami et al. (2009) found that women's adulation of a favorite same-gender celebrity predicted more positive attitudes toward, and consideration of, having cosmetic surgery. Celebrity worship of both intense–personal reasons and entertainment–social reasons predicted acceptance of cosmetic surgery, though intense–personal celebrity worship was the strongest predictor. Furthermore, women and men who engaged in intense–personal worship of celebrities with admirable bodies were more likely to undergo elective cosmetic surgery within an 8-month period (Maltby & Day, 2011). Although the relationship between overall celebrity worship and cosmetic surgery acceptance has been observed among American women, the findings do not appear to extend to South Korean women (Jung & Hwang, 2016).

However, it may be important to consider whether an individual has a parasocial bond with a celebrity because of the potential assimilation effects. In this case, exposure to a beloved Taylor Swift might make women feel thinner by association, leading them to feel better about their bodies. In other words, PSRs may improve body esteem because they alter individuals' perceptions of their own bodies via assimilation processes.

To explore this possibility, Young and colleagues (2012, 2013) conducted a series of studies testing the parasocial relationship–moderation hypothesis: that PSR status with idealized media figures determines whether contrast or assimilation will occur. The initial studies focused on the effects of thin media figures on women's body image (Young et al., 2012). Study 1 manipulated perceived similarity with a thin female model (simulating a PSR) and found that women who were exposed to a thin model with whom they perceived similarity felt better about their bodies than those who did not perceive

similarity. In Study 2, exposure to a celebrity who was perceived as thin (as opposed to normal weight) led women to feel worse about their bodies (i.e., a contrast effect). This is consistent with the meta-analytic reviews that suggest negative effects of thin celebrities on body esteem. However, having a PSR with the celebrity attenuated and even reversed this effect. Specifically, women who were exposed to a favorite celebrity they perceived as thin felt better about their bodies than those exposed to a control celebrity they perceived as thin (i.e., an assimilation effect). Finally, Study 3 revealed assimilation as the underlying mechanism of increased body satisfaction following exposure to PSRs. Having a PSR with a celebrity predicted increased body satisfaction because women assimilated the celebrity's thin body size to the self.

In a follow-up study, Young et al. (2013) replicated and extended these findings by investigating the effects of PSRs with superheroes on men's body image. Male participants were exposed to a muscular versus nonmuscular image of their favorite versus nonfavorite superhero. Next, participants' current body esteem and handgrip strength were assessed. As predicted, exposure to a muscular (as opposed to nonmuscular) superhero made men feel worse about their bodies when a PSR did not exist (i.e., a contrast effect). However, having a PSR with a muscular superhero not only protected men from the harmful effects on body image, but also led them to display greater physical strength (i.e., an assimilation effect). Taken together, the studies conducted by Young et al. (2012, 2013) suggest that media figures are not inevitably detrimental to body image and may even be beneficial when PSRs exist. This is because PSRs elicit assimilative processes, which can have favorable consequences for individuals' body esteem.

At first glance, the research findings discussed above appear incompatible as studies seem to suggest that PSRs simultaneously have both positive and negative consequences for body image. One potential explanation for this discrepancy might have to do with the nature of the study designs. Whereas the Young et al. (2012, 2013) studies were experimental and manipulated PSR status, the others were correlational (with the exception of Z. Brown & Tiggemann, 2016) and measured PSR or celebrity worship status without manipulating it. Given the correlational nature of the research, it is impossible to determine the causal link between PSRs and poor body image. Although the common interpretation is that PSRs lead to poor body image, it is feasible that poor body image leads people to be drawn to PSRs due to their assimilative benefits (Young et al., 2012, 2013). In other words, if PSRs with Taylor Swift make people feel better about their bodies, then the people who need those boosts the most (i.e., those with negative views of their bodies) may be the most attracted to Swift. This would be similar to finding that people who suffer from headaches are most likely to take pain relievers. It is not that pain relievers lead to headaches—in fact it is the opposite. The positive relationship between headaches and pain relievers is because the pain relievers temporarily alleviate the headaches (see a similar argument regarding the association between PSR and loneliness in Chapter 10). The same may be true for PSRs and body-esteem issues. People who suffer from low body

esteem may be drawn to PSRs with thin celebrities because they temporarily alleviate their low body esteem (Young et al., 2012, 2013). In support, research does suggest that people are attracted to celebrities who embody their ideals for themselves (Derrick et al., 2008). Thus, the seemingly opposing interpretations regarding PSRs may actually be congruent if the correlational studies are reinterpreted.

Unpublished research conducted by Young and colleagues (2022) provided some initial support for the perspective that people who experience body dissatisfaction are especially drawn to their PSRs. One study experimentally manipulated participants' body image and found that those who experienced body dissatisfaction (compared to a control condition) reported greater interest in activities related to their favorite celebrities. Another study employed a daily diary methodology and found that lower body satisfaction on one day predicted a greater likelihood of exposure to favorite celebrities the following day. Overall, these findings suggest that the correlation between poor body image and PSRs may be due to individuals with poor body image being drawn to their favorite celebrities. Additional research should be conducted to further examine this possibility.

Furthermore, future research should employ more experimental designs to manipulate PSRs and examine their effects on body esteem and disordered eating symptomology. It is hoped this research would shed some light on when and why assimilative and contrastive processes may occur in response to celebrities and fictional characters.

Using PSRs to Regulate Unpleasant States

The previous sections detailed the (mostly) positive effects that PSRs can have on the self. Because people often assimilate PSRs to the self, PSRs can make people feel better about themselves, better about their abilities, and (at least sometimes) better about their bodies. The current section looks at some of the implications of those positive effects.

Self-Affirmation

If PSRs can bolster the self, then they should be particularly useful when those positive effects are necessary. In other words, we should see evidence that people use PSRs to bolster the self in various ways and when they need bolstering the most.

For example, we should see the effects of bolstering the self most strongly in people who are highly motivated to bolster their self-concepts. Narcissists, for example, are particularly interested in affirming any positive attitudes they have toward themselves (Campbell & Foster, 2007). Thus, it may follow that they would be particularly interested in forming bonds with celebrities who allow them to do that. Indeed, research suggests that those higher in narcissism are likely to have intense celebrity interest (Ashe et al., 2005) and are drawn to characters with similarly narcissistic features, such as comic book superheroes (Brodie & Ingram, 2020; Gibson et al., 2018). Furthermore, narcissists may be drawn to celebrities because they tend to find being famous appealing and therefore engage more with, and feel closer to, famous celebrities (D. Greenwood et al., 2017). In

other words, people high in narcissism, who tend to characterize themselves as having high self-importance and social power, may be drawn to PSR targets who emulate their desired or perceived level of fame and success.

Similarly, individuals who value specific aspects of themselves may be drawn to celebrities and characters who embody those aspects. Those celebrities would provide a means of bolstering the parts of the self that are most important (Sandvoss, 2005). Indeed, research suggests that the fans' choice of which celebrity to form a PSR with is often based, in part, on their beliefs that the celebrity is similar to themselves in terms of their most important values, beliefs, or personality (Sirgy, 1982). For example, people who are highly materialistic are more likely to form parasocial bonds with sports celebrities, who are perceived as having lavish lifestyles (Sun & Wu, 2012). Additionally, nonfeminist fans of the series *Twilight* were transported into the narrative of the story more than feminist fans, likely due to the nonfeminist themes of the story (Aubrey et al., 2018). Sometimes, the similarity between the PSR and the viewer may be exaggerated by the viewer as a means of bolstering the self (J. Cohen & Hershman-Shitrit, 2017). For example, research suggests that self-reported similarity to an aggressive character predicted greater parasocial interaction, while actual measured trait aggression did not (Q. Tian & Hoffner, 2010). In summary, regardless of whether they are real or imagined similarities, individuals are likely to form PSRs with targets they perceive to be similar to their ideal or most important versions of themselves, and those similarities can help people feel closer to their desired selves. Thus, PSRs with celebrities and characters provide the opportunity for people to affirm the aspects of themselves that they find important.

Escape From Demands on Self

PSRs may also allow people to alleviate the psychological demands of the self (Slater & Cohen, 2016). By assimilating PSRs to the self, people can shift away from thinking about their individual selves (and the stresses and difficulty that might come with that self) by joining the milieu of the media figure for a brief time. Although they focus more on narratives than PSRs, studies examining the temporarily expanded boundaries of the self (TEBOTS) model supported this thesis. Specifically, these studies have found that threats to the self can increase responsiveness to narratives due to the ability of narratives to temporarily expand the boundaries of the self and distract from threats to the nonexpanded self (Johnson et al., 2021). In other words, when one's real self is full of pressures and worries, narratives (and bonds with characters) can provide temporary relief by allowing people to expand the self by vicariously living in a different reality (Slater et al., 2014). In support, research has found that people in a state of reduced self-control showed increased enjoyment of narratives as well as increased transportation into the narrative (Johnson et al., 2015). Conversely, people who were self-affirmed (to alleviate the everyday demands of self-concept maintenance) experienced less narrative engagement (Johnson et al., 2016). Other research, conducted during the time when people were self-isolating during

the COVID-19 pandemic, suggested that people are able to use engagement with narratives to self-expand and thus cope with the identity threats associated with social isolation (Khoo et al., 2021; although see Sacco et al., 2021 for alternate findings). Finally, utilizing an experimental and daily diary methodology, Derrick (2013) found that people were more likely to engage in familiar fictional worlds, including favorite television shows, after exerting self-control and experiencing depletion. Notably, exposure to these familiar fictional worlds restored individuals' depleted self-control and mood. Overall, these studies provided evidence that narratives can increase self-control by allowing an escape from self and suggested that PSRs may also have restorative effects on the self, in particular among depleted individuals who need this help the most. Future research will be necessary to directly examine the effects of PSRs on well-being via escape from self.

Mood Regulation

People may be able to use PSRs to regulate affect and escape unpleasant emotional states. Lakey et al. (2014) found that after experiencing drops in mood, people sought media figures who had previously elicited a positive mood. In doing so, they were able to effectively improve their mood (compared to people who engaged in other activities). Some research suggests that people may be more likely to utilize PSRs to bolster their mood and feelings of connection when traditional social options are limited (e.g., during the COVID-19 pandemic). Specifically, during times of social isolation, more extroverted individuals (who are usually less likely to use PSRs; Derrick et al., 2009) were more likely to take advantage of PSRs as a readily available social opportunity (Naidu et al., 2022). This suggests that people are likely to engage with PSRs in order to fulfill their needs, whether these needs are unfulfilled due to situational constraints, socialization preferences, or personality traits.

In summary, understanding the outcomes of PSRs for the self can provide additional depth to the literature on when people may be drawn to parasocial bonds in order to bolster the self. Because assimilating PSRs can impact the self-concept, people may be drawn to form PSRs when they are highly motivated to improve the self-concept, when the PSRs are perceived as similar to their ideal selves, when they are feeling depleted, and when they are feeling lonely or sad. Overall, research suggests that people can use PSRs to bolster the self and increase positive mood.

Conclusions

One of the amazing things about human beings is our ability to feel connections with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). We connect with not only the people in our lives, but also those we do not even know (Gabriel et al., 2016). We form bonds with actors in television and movies, characters in books, musicians, athletes, and even video game characters. As reviewed in this chapter, these relationships can have important effects on how we think and feel about ourselves. Our thoughts about ourselves can shift as we include PSR targets

in our self-concepts; we can change how we feel about our bodies; we can feel capable of things that we otherwise would not feel capable of; we can shift to think of ourselves as lovable and worthy of affection. We can then use those PSRs to strategically shift our thoughts and feelings about ourselves at the times when we need them the most.

Although a great deal is known about the effects of PSRs on the self, there is even more left to be studied. First, and perhaps most essential, not all of the research described in this chapter actually examined PSRs. Some research examined PSRs, but other research examined people who have interest in celebrities or people engaging with narratives. It would be useful for future research to specifically examine the role PSRs play in these findings. For example, does the role of narratives in causing feelings of belonging (which then lead to increases in self-esteem) depend on PSRs with the characters? Alternately, is it enhanced when there are PSRs with the characters (but would still exist without)? Research is necessary to examine those, and other, issues.

In addition, all of the existing research examined contrast and assimilation effects in an "either/or" fashion; people either assimilate a celebrity to the self or they contrast them. This is a reasonable approach as contrast and assimilation have opposite effects on the self, so understanding which occurs at any one time, and with any one relationship, is important. However, in real life, things are never this simple. Media users may experience both pride in a PSR's accomplishment and a sense of self-doubt because of it. They may shift from one of these experiences to the other quickly and fluidly, feeling joyful one moment and then doubtful the next. On the one hand, this is a challenge for researchers. How can one predict whether contrast versus assimilation will happen when it is possible for both to occur and to occur in close proximity to one another? On the other hand, this presents a real opportunity for industrious researchers. Very little research—in any area of social comparison—has examined the coexistence of both contrast and assimilation effects or their close proximity to one another. We suspect this is one of those cases where, as individuals, we are all aware of an experience (feeling both being proud of someone and a little insecure due to their performance), but as scientists, we have not yet unpacked it. Therefore, this would be an area that could greatly benefit from the important contributions that researchers could make.

Future research may also examine if the same self-related outcomes that occur due to PSRs with celebrities and fictional characters also occur in more modern (and thus less studied) methods of forming PSRs. For example, video games introduce a new level of interactivity, allowing players to take on the role of the main character rather than just watching a story unfold (Klimmt et al., 2009; Vorderer, 2000). By acting in the role of the main character, players develop a monadic relationship and can identify with the character they control. Theoretically, this intimate identification could lead to a stronger merging of the player's self and the game character, which could then lead to more intense changes in their self-concept (Klimmt et al., 2009). This suggests that PSRs with video game characters may affect the self more quickly. However, there is also the possibility that the

identification with the character in a video game may be less permanent than the identification with a celebrity. With a celebrity, there is an ongoing bond where information is learned over time and often can be gleaned from multiple sources. Conversely, video games provide an intense experience of stepping into the shoes of a character that ends just as quickly when the game is over. Thus, the effects may be more intense, but shorter acting (Klimmt et al., 2009). Future research will be necessary to examine these questions.

Future research may also want to examine how PSRs can affect the self indirectly through the fandoms that come with them. As we reviewed, identifying with others who share a PSR is associated with social well-being and social connection (which are both highly related to self-esteem; Wann & Weaver, 2009). Similarly, higher fan identity is associated with higher relational well-being (Vinney et al., 2019). Although none of these studies examined self-esteem, it seems likely that these increases in social well-being would, in turn, lead to increases in self-esteem. Very little research has examined how PSRs lead to fandoms and the effects of those fandoms on human thriving. Future research would benefit from directly exploring those relationships.

Finally, correlational data suggest that self-disclosure leads to more "likes" and comments on social media and allows fans to build greater feelings of similarity with the celebrity (Choi & Rifon, 2012; Giles, 2007; Zappavigna, 2012). This increased self-similarity then predicts greater commitment and loyalty to the celebrity and even predicts higher quality of life and higher well-being for the fans (Kim & Kim, 2020). In other words, there is a complicated dance that happens in interactions between PSR targets and the people who feel connected to them. This dance pulls the viewers in and also has the potential to affect feelings about the self. As more and more people become potential targets of PSRs (via the many social media and video-sharing platforms), it will become increasingly interesting (and possible) to study how the information they present about themselves affects (a) the bonds that are formed with them and (b) the way their fans think and feel about themselves.

There has never been a time in history when people have so much exposure to such a wide variety of targets for PSRs. Thus, understanding the impact of PSRs on the self is important, timely, and a great avenue for continuing research. In this chapter, we reviewed the research in this area. Collectively, it strongly suggests that the self-concept can be affected by PSRs, and that people can, and do, use those PSRs strategically to bolster the self. Finally, we can conclude, with great certainty, that much more exciting research is possible and that groundbreaking discoveries are sure to come. This is an area of research with many rich avenues that are wide open for exploration, and we greatly look forward to seeing what comes next.

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CHAPTER

12 Effects of Parasocial Experiences on Intergroup Relationships

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Abstract

This chapter reviews existing research on how mediated contact with media figures (e.g., celebrities, fictional characters, public figures, and others) can affect intergroup relations. The review is organized around two parasocial experiences through which mediated intergroup encounters with media figures are theorized to affect audience prejudice: parasocial contact and vicarious contact. The chapter concludes with several recommendations for advancing theory and research on media figure intergroup contact effects and understanding how intergroup media figure involvement can be most advantageous for members of marginalized social groups. Moving forward, any theorizing of media figure contact effects should be not only comprehensive enough to explain how diverse groups of people respond to different media figures, but also just enough to inform and promote social change that is beneficial to the groups that have been most victimized by the prejudices that intergroup contact theory has always sought to remedy.

Key Words: intergroup contact, mediated contact, parasocial contact, vicarious contact, prejudice

Introduction

In the mid-20th century, Gordon Allport (1954) formulated the contact hypothesis, which stipulated that under the right conditions face-to-face communication between members of different social groups could reduce prejudice. Around the same time, Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956) observed that audiences respond to media personae parasocially, engaging with them in ways similar to how they would in face-to-face encounters or with people they know interpersonally. Both of these milestones broke ground for entire fields of research into the processes and outcomes of intergroup contact (e.g., Harwood & Joyce, 2012; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and parasocial interaction and relationships (e.g., Giles, 2002; Tukachinsky et al., 2020). Yet, given the scholarly attention that both topics have received, it is somewhat surprising that it took half a century for these lines of research to merge into a body of work on mediated intergroup contact. After all, both scholarly and public fascination with

parasocial involvement has always rooted its close resemblance to two-way social contact. Psychologically speaking, it is remarkable that because humans are hardwired to have a sensitivity to the presence of social others, our perception blurs the distinction between people we encounter through the media and those that we encounter in the flesh. But practically speaking, the implication is that media figures affect audiences *para*socially in similar ways to how they are affected by their two-way social interactions and relationships (Reeves & Nass, 1996). Therefore, any theory articulating humans' responses to other humans should be applicable to understanding how humans respond to other mediated humans, including intergroup contact theory.

Allport (1954) also recognized the potential of media figures to act as a surrogate for social actors, arguing that because direct, face-to-face intergroup contact could be too intimidating for some individuals, indirect contact on a "fantasy level" might be the best way to initiate cross-group contact in many cases (p. 488). He further suggested that programs aimed at reducing prejudice "start with fiction, drama, and film and move gradually into more realistic methods of [intergroup contact] training" (p. 488). And although he blamed the mass media of the time for sowing prejudice with its emphasis on "war, intrigue, hatred, and crime," he also conceded that repeated exposure to "pro-tolerance propaganda" that allays audience anxiety could potentially help reduce prejudice (p. 493). Foreshadowing parasocial contact effects, he even hinted that media campaigns could be particularly effective at reducing prejudice if a "prestigious symbol," such as Eleanor Roosevelt or Bing Crosby, was involved (p. 495).

This chapter reviews existing research on how mediated contact with celebrities, fictional characters, public figures, and other media figures can affect intergroup relations. Much of the review focuses on the process of parasocial contact (Schiappa et al., 2005, 2006), arguably the most extensively researched form of mediated intergroup contact. We also synthesize work on vicarious contact (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007), a complimentary mediated contact process that is driven by media figure identification, but works in concert with audiences' parasocial experiences.

In the interest of comprehensiveness, the scope of this review includes any publication that explicitly stated that the study had been guided by the parasocial contact hypothesis, even if it did not directly consider the role of parasocial experiences in their study design. However, we argue that it is incumbent on future research to exercise greater precision in how mediated intergroup contact effects are conceptualized and tested. Specifically, we propose that "parasocial contact" refers exclusively to a process in which audiences develop a relational attachment with outgroup media personae. We conclude the chapter with several suggestions that can enhance our ability to distinguish between different processes of mediated intergroup contact effects, identify the mechanisms driving these effects—both during and after the mediated contact experience—and examine how these effects might differ for members of socially disadvantaged and socially advantaged groups.

Parasocial Contact

A basic tenant of intergroup contact theory is that a person's prejudice toward a social outgroup can be reduced when they have positive, repeated contact with an outgroup member (Allport, 1954). The underlying premise here is that the more people learn about the outgroup through having interactions that disconfirm their existing prejudices the more these individuals can draw from this knowledge to reconceptualize their negative understanding of the outgroup as a whole. Drawing from this logic, Schiappa et al. (2005) proposed the parasocial contact hypothesis. Observing that, thanks to the ubiquity of media, people often have the same or sometimes better opportunity to get to know fictional characters, celebrities, and public figures than they do to develop intimate relationships in their social lives. They argued that this kind of mediated interaction with outgroup media figures could serve as a proxy for face-to-face intergroup contact and potentially reduce audience prejudice toward the outgroup in accordance with intergroup contact theory. Though not articulated by the authors, this line of thinking aligns well with the fantasy level of contact that Allport (1954) indicated could be beneficial in his initial theorizing.

Schiappa and colleagues (2005, 2006) found support for the parasocial contact hypothesis through four studies demonstrating that exposure to gay fictional characters (on the HBO drama *Six Feet Under* and the NBC sitcom *Will & Grace*), gay reality television show personalities (*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* series), and a gender-fluid[1] stand-up comedian (Eddie Izzard), all were associated with viewers' reduced prejudice toward gay men and people who dress in gender nonconforming ways, respectively. Arguably, the most impressive study in this series, in terms of providing casual evidence of parasocial contact effects, utilized a Solomon four-group experimental design. In this study, college students who watched 10 episodes of *Six Feet Under* over the course of 5 weeks had lower sexual prejudice compared to a control group and compared to a pretest group. Providing evidence for the parasocial component of this process, prejudice was inversely related to interpersonal attraction to the show's gay characters. Notably, some of Schiappa et al.'s (2005, 2006) studies also showed that the less interpersonal contact heterosexual participants had with homosexual people, the greater the positive influence that parasocial contact had on their attitudes toward gays and lesbians. This is consistent with the finding that media exposure has the greatest influence on people's perception of outgroups when direct, firsthand experience with the group is lacking (e.g., Fujioka, 1999).

Nearly two decades after this initial research, parasocial contact has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention (see Banas et al., 2020), a trend that seems to have accelerated within the past 5 years. A basic search for research on "parasocial contact" in Google Scholar will retrieve a score of studies showing a link between majority group members' exposure to positive media depictions of outgroup media characters and public figures and reductions in prejudice toward various marginalized social groups, including Black people (C. Kim & Harwood, 2020); Muslim people (Abrams et al, 2018; Alrababa'h et al., 2021; Murrar & Brauer, 2018; Siem et al., 2021); various subgroups within the LGBTQA+

(lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, asexual, and other identities) community (Bond, 2021; Bond & Compton, 2015; Madžarević, & Soto-Sanfiel, 2018; Massey et al, 2021; McDermott et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2018); immigrant people (Igartua & Frutos, 2017; Wojcieszak et al., 2019); people with mental illness (Hoffner & Cohen, 2012, 2015, 2018; Lookadoo & Wong, 2020; Wong et al., 2017); people with sexually transmitted infections (So & Nabi, 2013); and people with a disability (de Groot et al., 2021; Zhang & Haller, 2021).

Much of this research involved surveys in which participants were asked about their past exposure to an outgroup media persona and intergroup outcomes such as their feelings, attitudes, or behaviors toward the persona's social group (e.g., Hoffner & Cohen, 2015). However, other times, as with the original tests of the parasocial contact hypothesis (Schiappa et al., 2005), experiments have been used to demonstrate that audience members' attitudes toward social outgroups changed following exposure to a media figure who belonged to that group (e.g., Murrar & Brauer, 2018). Notably, as we discuss in the next section, although all of these studies rely on the parasocial contact hypothesis as a rationale, only a small proportion of them provide evidence that parasocial involvement with media figures was the mechanism driving these intergroup effects. Nonetheless, this body of research consistently indicates that exposure to outgroup media figures can be helpful in ameliorating intergroup prejudice.

There is even some evidence that secondary transfer effects (Pettigrew, 2009) can occur when positive feelings that are engendered toward the outgroup in the interaction transfers to other social groups that were not involved in the observed interaction. Joyce and Harwood (2014) showed that the positive attitudes that were fostered through mediated contact with an undocumented immigrant family transferred to cognitively related outgroups (e.g., political refugees, Black people), but not cognitively unrelated groups (e.g., elderly people). Likewise, Lissista and Kushnirovich (2020) found that frequency of exposure to certain entertainment TV portrayals of LGBTQA+ characters was associated with not only more positive attitudes toward the primary group (the LGBTQA+ community), but also a decreased desire for social distance from a secondary group: people with Asperger disorder. Interestingly, these secondary transfer effects have been shown to occur from a fictional social group to nonfictional social groups as well. Vezzali et al. (2015) found that reading *Harry Potter* books, a story that focuses on fictional stigmatized groups (i.e., "Mudbloods"), was associated with reduced prejudice toward nonfictional marginalized social groups (e.g., refugees and gay people), but this effect only occurred among readers who had a strong wishful identification with the story's protagonist.

While positive mediated experiences improve intergroup attitudes, research also provided evidence of "negative parasocial contact" effects, in which exposure to negative portrayals of members of marginalized groups such as immigrants increased intergroup bias (Schemer & Meltzer, 2020; Visintin et al., 2017). This finding was consistent with the

relatively large body of literature connecting the negative media portrayals of marginalized groups in the United States to negative intergroup outcomes (e.g., Atwell Seate, 2017).

In short, mediated contact can have positive or negative implications for intergroup relations, depending on the quality of portrayals of various social groups. But, sadly, there is also reason to suspect that negative mediated contact wields a stronger influence on intergroup perceptions than positive contact. Paolini et al. (2014) demonstrated that compared to a positive portrayal of a U.S. citizen's interactions with undocumented Latinx immigrants in a documentary, a negative portrayal of these intergroup interactions had a greater impact on viewers' group category salience, suggesting that they were more likely to generalize the negative associations with a few characters to undocumented immigrants as a whole group. This finding is consistent with Joyce and Harwood's (2014) results in a study on the same documentary in which participants watched a negative interaction between their ingroup member and an outgroup (immigrant) characters. They found that the more viewers identified with the ingroup character, the more negative their attitudes became. Somewhat encouragingly, however, Paolini et al. (2014) determined that these adverse mediated contact effects could be buffered if viewers had positive past experiences with illegal immigrants. The importance of this finding for theorizing on parasocial contact cannot be overstated because it specifies an important boundary condition for these effects. Intergroup contact theory holds that category salience (i.e., thinking about the interaction in intergroup vs. personal-level terms) is required for the feelings engendered by the potential intergroup encounter to generalize to the larger social group. In other words, mediated intergroup contact effects will only occur if the audiences experience the outgroup media figures as typical members of their group instead of unique individuals who are exceptional to their group.

Potential Barriers to Parasocial Contact Effects

As discussed previously, according to the parasocial contact hypothesis, ideally, audiences would become parasocially involved with an outgroup member through the media, and this involvement would reduce prejudice. However, there are several barriers to the parasocial contact effects. Here we review some of these potential impediments.

Barriers to Parasocial Contact Formation

Ingroup favoritism can be a barrier to generating a positive parasocial contact altogether. As Tukachinsky et al. (2019) demonstrated, people are less inclined to become involved with media figures who are members of outgroups. In this way, "the process that is supposed to underlie the effects of mediated contact is undermined by the intergroup dynamic that the parasocial contact seeks to combat in the first place" (p. 4564). In fact, extant literature on selective media exposure suggests that individuals may specifically choose media content that reinforces their group identities (see Chapter 18 for review). Accordingly, those who

would benefit the most from parasocial contact may be particularly reluctant to consume media that offers such opportunities.

The way to overcome the challenge of this bias is not straightforward, but when possible, it may help to delay the revelation of a character's outgroup status. For instance, Kaufman and Libby (2012) examined the effect of reading a first-person narrative about a gay or Black character. They manipulated the timing of the revelation of the protagonist's marginalized group identity, presenting it either early in the narrative or later in the story, after the predominantly heterosexual, White readers had an opportunity to become acquainted with the character without having their biases toward the outgroups triggered. They found that postponing the outgroup status disclosure resulted in higher levels of involvement with the character and reduced readers' prejudice toward the outgroups. Another possible solution for bypassing the ingroup favoritism effect involves using an ingroup member character as a bridge to facilitate the intergroup contact with the outgroup character (e.g., Tukachinsky et al., 2019). This parasocial friend-of-a-friend contact process (Park, 2012) is discussed in greater detail further in this chapter, in the section on vicarious contact.

Barriers to Parasocial Contact Generalization

Crucially, even if audiences have positive intergroup encounter with a media figure, they must generalize their favorable impressions of the media figure to the media figure's group as a whole in order for parasocial contact to reduce prejudice. Group typicality is a critical factor that can make or break this aspect of the parasocial contact process. As discussed, the typicality condition for generalizing from media personalities to the nonmediated world can be a blessing when positive firsthand experiences shield from effects of negative media representations (Paolini et al., 2014). However, the same process can impede the effects of sympathetic media representations. Based on intergroup contact theorizing (e.g., Brown & Hewstone, 2005), it stands to reason that positive depictions of outgroup media figures should also be perceived as being typical of their group in order to reduce audience prejudice. If people think negatively about a particular group, an excessively positive portrayal of a group member might seem too exceptional and therefore not representative of the group as a whole.

Somewhat paradoxically, as Joyce et al. (2020) pointed out, this means that media portrayals of outgroup members should lean into certain stereotypes while simultaneously challenging others in order to encourage intergroup attitude change. Their study demonstrated that there is a curvilinear relationship between group typicality of a media figure and beliefs about how representative the media figure is of their group. Specifically, they found that a negative exemplar of an older adult that adhered to the stereotype of older adults being bad drivers was perceived as being highly typical, eliciting negative beliefs about older adults as a whole. But they also found that a highly positive exemplar of an older adult that challenged the stereotype, which was perceived as atypical, did not

improve judgments about older adults as a group. Only an exemplar that consisted of both stereotypical and counterstereotypical information, portraying a moderate level of typicality, improved beliefs about older adult drivers generally. The authors referred to mildly counterstereotypical portrayals a "sweet spot" for fostering positive intergroup perceptions. These findings indicate that parasocial contact may only be effective with media figures who simultaneously challenge and conform to some of the negative stereotypes associated with their social groups.

Toward Conceptual Clarity of Parasocial Contact

Together, the aforementioned studies provided compelling evidence that when audiences have intergroup encounters through media exposure—positive or negative—the effects of this exposure on their outgroup prejudice can generally be expected to occur through the same processes as if they had a face-to-face encounter. However, an important caveat to bear in mind is that although each of these studies provided evidence that media content can shape audiences' outgroup-related perceptions and behavior, they did not all provide evidence of *parasocial* contact specifically. Although many, if not all, of these studies cited the parasocial contact hypothesis (Schiappa et al., 2005, 2006) as their theoretical rationale, only some of them (e.g., Bond, 2021; Bond & Compton, 2015; Hoffner & Cohen, 2015, 2018; So & Nabi, 2013; Wong et al., 2017) directly examined the role of parasocial experiences.

Of course, even studies that do not establish parasocial relationships (PSRs) as being a mechanism of intergroup effects can still provide support for parasocial contact process, albeit indirectly. Some studies, for example, have examined types of media figure involvement besides parasocial processing (e.g., character identification; Chung & Slater, 2013; Lookadoo & Wong, 2020) as the vehicle for parasocial contact effects. As mediated intergroup contact theory advances, so too does the precision in which entertainment theory conceptualizes and operationalizes different ways in which audiences can relate to personae they encounter through the media. In addition to PSRs, audiences may experience liking, similarity, identification, wishful identification, or parasocial interaction with media figures. These are all distinct, albeit related, forms of engagement that could improve intergroup relations. At best, studies that referred to any type of involvement "parasocial contact" could be criticized on account of semantic imprecision,[2] but not much more. The notion that any type of positive regard for outgroup members can reduce prejudice toward that group is entirely consistent with intergroup contact theory. After all, to some extent, all forms of positive media figure involvement should be associated with the mechanisms that undergird contact's effects, including increased knowledge and empathy and reduced anxiety toward the outgroup (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Indeed, in Schiappa's et al. (2005) original proposal of the parasocial contact hypothesis, the authors relied on measures of interpersonal attraction (McCroskey & McCain, 1974) and homophily (McCroskey et al., 1975), rather than measures of PSR strength.

In some cases, even if PSRs (or any other form of media figure involvement) was not specifically accounted for, the study's context hints that reductions in prejudice were likely attributable to viewers' sense of connection with an outgroup member. For instance, Alrababa'h et al. (2021) used an event analysis to illustrate that after high-profile Muslim soccer player Mohamed Salah joined the Liverpool Football Club hate crimes against Muslims and anti-Muslim tweets decreased locally. Although the researchers did not account for PSR intensity, or any other form of involvement for that matter, by virtue of Salah's celebrity and the surrounding publicity it does seem reasonable to infer that the public probably developed a greater sense of intimacy with the athlete during the time period analyzed. Thus, it does not seem like too much of stretch to interpret these findings as support for the parasocial contact effect.

Nonetheless, a more direct test of the parasocial contact hypothesis should demonstrate that prejudice reduction is, in part, the result of audiences developing a sense of affective or relational involvement with a mediated outgroup member. In other words, parasocial contact involves more than simply being exposed to a mediated depiction of a group member. Consistent with research indicating that the success of intergroup contact at reducing prejudice hinges on the *quality* of those relationships (e.g., Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), we want to underscore that parasocial *relationships* should be at the heart of these prejudice-reducing effects of parasocial contact. Allport (1954) acknowledged as much when he observed that superficial cross-group contact with casual acquaintances was not as effective at reducing prejudice as intimate contact in the form of personal relationships, such as friendship, and this point was later underscored in by Pettigrew (1998) in his theorizing on the process of decategorizing and recategorizing. A meta-analysis on the effects of cross-group friendships on prejudice reduction found that no matter how studies operationalize friendship, having a cross-group friendship is positively correlated with favorable attitudes toward the outgroup, and indicators of closeness (e.g., time spent with an outgroup friend and amount of self-disclosure) are associated with the largest effects (Davies et al., 2011).

Turner et al. (2008) demonstrated that one reason that cross-group friendships can reduce social prejudice is because they lead to inclusion of the outgroup in the self, a process in which a person begins to categorize another as overlapping with their sense of self by virtue of sharing a close relationship and therefore begins to see the group they belong to as overlapping with themselves as well. Put differently, we perceive close friends as extensions of ourselves, and if our friends belong to different social groups, we cognitively categorize those groups as being closer to ourselves as well. This is another reason that the *relational* component of relationships with media figures is a defining variable in parasocial contact effects. Although research has yet to examine the specific role that inclusion of the outgroup in the self plays in parasocial contact, it stands to reason that the more audience members feel intimately connected to an outgroup media figure, the

more mediated contact should blur the lines between the self and the outgroup, thereby lessening negative bias against the outgroup.

This is all to argue that, thus far, "parasocial contact" has been too liberally applied as a catch-all term for any way in which mediated contact with an outgroup media figure can influence viewers' prejudice toward that person's social group. There are diverse robust theoretical frameworks besides the parasocial contact hypothesis that can explain these different types of intergroup media effects. For instance, media cultivation theory (e.g., Calzo & Ward, 2009); priming (e.g., Chan & Yanos, 2018); exemplification (e.g., Ramasubramanian, 2015); framing (Findor et al., 2021); social norms theory (Paluck & Green, 2009); and narrative transportation (e.g., Murrar & Brauer, 2019) each provide explanations for how exposure to various positive media depictions of a group could increase social tolerance under certain conditions. As a collective, these all fall under the wide umbrella of intergroup media effects. Here we argue that the label of "parasocial contact" should be reserved for when audiences have some intergroup exposure to a specific media figure that leads to some pseudosocial, relational response to a media figure that affects their group-related perceptions in turn. Parasocial contact can certainly overlap with or work in concert with other intergroup media effects. For instance, consistent with narrative transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2002), a reader who is narratively engaged may be less likely to counterargue against messages about an outgroup. So, too, will they be more likely to experience intense PSRs with outgroup characters. But even if both of these processes lead to reduced prejudice, theoretical progress on mediated contact effects necessitates that these concepts be distinguished appropriately. The hallmark of the parasocial contact hypothesis that distinguishes it from other mediated contact processes is that the *relational quality* of contact with an outgroup media figure matters.

The importance of relational quality or closeness is underscored by findings presented in the first longitudinal test of the parasocial contact hypothesis. Bond (2021) demonstrated that heterosexual viewers of the TV show *Queer as Folk* developed PSRs with the gay characters on the show, with these relationships gradually becoming more intense over the course of 10 weeks. Viewers who began the study harboring the most prejudice toward the outgroup experienced the most intense relational growth while watching the show, suggesting that these viewers were able to reap the most benefit from having indirect intergroup contact in a safe (i.e., less anxiety producing), mediated, fictional space. Further, the results demonstrated that it was this intensity of PSR—how close they felt to the gay characters—that predicted viewers' desire for social justice for gay men rather than their general attitudes toward the outgroup. This finding speaks to the distinct role that parasocial involvement, conceptualized as pseudorelationships, plays as a mechanism for intergroup tolerance. A sense of relational attachment and bonding is at the heart of parasocial contact effects.

Vicarious Contact

A second process through which involvement with media figures can affect audience prejudice is vicarious contact. Around the same time that Schiappa et al. (2005, 2006) were testing the parasocial contact hypothesis, Ortiz and Harwood (2007) were expatiating an alternative but complimentary explanation for how audiences' involvement with media figures could affect their social prejudice toward outgroup members. Drawing from social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1994), they explained that vicarious outgroup contact affects outgroup-directed attitudes and behaviors through the process of observational learning. Media figures who belong to an audience member's ingroup serve as behavioral models from which the observer can learn about intergroup contact. In other words, media portrayals allow people to vicariously learn what outgroup members are like and how they should interact with them by watching their interactions with ingroup members. They argued that this process is facilitated by character identification, the process of vicariously adopting the cognitive and affective perspective of a character (J. Cohen, 2001).[3] In support of the social cognitive explanation for mediated contact effects, their study found that the more that heterosexual viewers identified with the ingroup character, Grace, on the show *Will and Grace*, the less they reported intergroup anxiety and the more likely they were to adopt her positive attitudes toward gay people (the outgroup) (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). Similarly, Joyce and Harwood (2014) demonstrated in an experiment that, after watching parts of a documentary featuring either negative or positive interactions between illegal immigrants and a U.S. citizen, viewers reported attitudes toward illegal immigrants that were in line with the valence of the portrayal they were exposed to. However, the more that viewers in the negatively valenced condition identified with the ingroup member (i.e., the U.S. citizen), the more of an influence this portrayal had on increasing prejudice toward illegal immigrants. More recently, Moyer-Gusé et al. (2019) showed that viewers who identified with the non-Muslim character (their ingroup) who was depicted living with a Muslim family in a documentary exhibited decreased Muslim-related prejudice. Consistent with a social cognitive theory, this effect was mediated (in part) by self-efficacy and reduced intergroup anxiety. Greater identification with the ingroup character who engaged with Muslims increased viewers' confidence that they also could effectively socialize with Muslims, and this decreased their anxiety and their prejudice, increasing their willingness to interact with Muslims in turn.

Because vicarious intergroup contact occurs whenever a person observes a member of their social ingroup interacting with outgroup members, this is not necessarily a media effect (Harwood, 2021). Vicarious contact can occur in face-to-face settings when, for instance, a person sees an ingroup friend interacting with an outgroup member. However, media portrayals of cross-group interactions are a common—arguably the most common—source of vicarious intergroup contact for most people. In fact, it is notable that vicarious contact is often initiated in experimental settings by asking participants to

consume media portrayals of intergroup interactions (White et al., 2020). Some examples of vicarious contact in the media include children's television shows that portray Arab and Jewish puppets in prosocial interactions (e.g., Cole et al., 2003), news reports[4] of race-related riots, or televised interactions between pundits from different political parties. Although identification is the type of media figure involvement that is theorized to be at the heart of vicarious contact effects, it stands to reason that parasocial involvement can play an important role in this process as well. It is plausible—if not likely—for instance, that even as audience members identify with an ingroup character, they can concurrently develop and maintain a parasocial attachment to outgroup characters. For example, *The Sex Lives of College Girls* is a fictional show about four college roommates who come from different racial, sexual orientation, and class backgrounds. Based on ingroup similarity, a heterosexual Indian viewer may be more inclined to adopt the perspective of Bela, a character of South Asian descent, who shares a friendship with Whitney, a Black character. While identifying as Bela, people may regard Whitney parasocially as a friend, particularly as the show progresses. In this example, we would expect for vicarious and parasocial processes to operate in tandem. In fact, if viewers are having a genuinely vicarious experience and they identify with Bela to the extent that they are capable of adopting her perspective and feelings, then it follows that they might share some of her affection toward Whitney. Likewise, vicariously experiencing Bela's positive interactions with Whitney could enhance the viewers' PSR by reducing barriers to relational closeness, like anxiety. Put differently, in this scenario, viewers' vicarious contact could moderate (i.e., enhance) the PSR with the outgroup character, thereby increasing any parasocial contact effects in addition to vicarious contact effects.

Joyce and Harwood (2014) provided some support for the possibility that vicarious and parasocial contact operate concurrently—perhaps even additively. In their study of vicarious contact with illegal immigrants by a U.S. citizen, they found that the effects of viewing an intergroup interaction on prejudice was mediated by liking for the illegal immigrants featured in the documentary. In other words, the negative portrayal indirectly influenced viewers' attitudes toward illegal immigrants generally by negatively affecting their involvement with the ones on the program. Their study did not test whether this mediated effect was moderated by identification with the U.S. citizen, so it is not clear whether liking for the outgroup character and identification with the ingroup character interacted to affect prejudice. Nonetheless, these findings do illustrate how two different types of character engagement can operate in tandem in a mediated intergroup scenario. However, notably, one study suggested that vicarious contact effects might be sufficient to reduce outgroup prejudice. Tukachinsky et al. (2019) found that readers' identification with an ingroup character (a friend of a person with opioid use disorder) in a magazine article was associated with support for opioid-related public health policies; however, parasocial involvement with the outgroup character (a person with opioid use disorder) was not related to policy support. Although the

researchers did not measure opioid-related prejudice directly so it's unclear whether readers' policy support was rooted in concern for the ingroup instead of the outgroup, this study hinted at the intriguing possibility that, in some cases, the vicarious experience of an intergroup encounter can be more effective than a more direct parasocial experience with an outgroup member.

However, in many cases audiences may have difficulty identifying with characters. In these cases, intergroup contact effects could be more likely to result from audience members' PSRs with an ingroup member character that is involved in a positive relationship with an outgroup character (Park, 2012). By extension, the audience becomes parasocially involved with the ingroup character's outgroup friend. As Park explained in this process, the outgroup character essentially becomes "a friend of a friend to the audience" (p. 146). This is arguably the truest mediated equivalent of extended contact in interpersonal relationships, when people become acquainted with people in social outgroups through their ingroup friends (e.g., White et al., 2020). This vicarious friendship effect may provide a particularly compelling explanation for mediated intergroup contact effects that occur through media personae who, by virtue of how they communicate with their audiences, are adept at cultivating an illusion of intimacy (e.g., newscasters and podcasters, social media influencers, podcasters). For example, Black audience members who are parasocially connected to Black MSNBC news host Joy Reid could become parasocially connected to her White colleague Rachel Maddow by watching them banter on air. To our knowledge, however, this specific process still has yet to be studied empirically.

Future Directions

Although the research media-figure-facilitated contact is certainly robust enough to warrant a review, it is still nascent. Generously, we estimate that there are probably fewer than 20 studies that have directly tested the parasocial contact hypothesis (at least according to the strict distinctions that we have recommended in this chapter) and fewer than 10 that have examined vicarious contact effects. As previously mentioned, all mediated intergroup experiences do not necessarily foster the types of media figure involvement that might lead to intergroup contact effects, as they do not necessarily share the same processes, and likely these processes vary by individual-level viewer characteristics. For this reason, the next logical steps in developing theory behind media figure contact effects is to ensure appropriate media stimuli are selected for studies of contact effects theorized to be driven by media figure involvement to further distinguish these processes by identifying the mediators and moderators of intergroup contact with media figures to account for the effects of all types of media figure involvement—both PSRs and parasocial interaction, both during and after media exposure—and to better understand how all audiences respond to mediated intergroup contact regardless of how advantaged the social groups they identify with are.

Selecting Stimuli Conducive to Contact Effects

This chapter has reviewed several studies that have relied on the parasocial contact hypothesis as a rationale for prejudice reduction following media exposure. However, not all of these studies made as compelling a case for why the media stimuli in question would facilitate the types of media figure involvement—parasocial or otherwise—as they did not provide evidence of the relational quality or intensity that could be expected to facilitate parasocial contact effects. There are a handful of studies, for example, that examined the effects of news content exposure as parasocial contact (Abrams et al., 2018; Lissitsa & Kushnirovich, 2021; Schemer & Meltzer, 2020; Visintin et al., 2017). Yet, typical news reports, even those that focus on intergroup-related issues, do not seem to focus on the personal details of individuals enough to cultivate a sense of relational contact. Reading or watching about something that happened to someone after the fact is quite a different experience from getting to know a person. In many cases, there may not even be a specific outgroup member mentioned in news articles with whom audiences could develop a sense of relational connection. For this reason, we believe that parasocial contact effects should be more typical in response to narrative-driven (e.g., fictional stories, documentaries, or reality television) and serialized (e.g., news programs, daily podcasts, or talk shows) types of media content.

We are also skeptical that genuine parasocial contact effects can be captured in response to stimuli that do not give audience members enough relational depth or quality to develop an intimate impression of a character or other type of media figure. For instance, studies that expose viewers to short articles or short, 10-minute clips of full-length films or TV series may provide a contact experience that is too superficial to result in parasocial contact effects. However, this is not because *time* is the crucial variable for parasocial intergroup contact effects to occur, but instead because *quality* of mediated contact is likely the most important factor to consider here (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Time is theorized to be an important ingredient for face-to-face contact effects because the stages of relationship development require time to move the phases needed to improve intergroup attitudes (e.g., decategorization, salient categorization; Pettigrew, 1998). Mutual trust and closeness typically do not happen overnight. However, this process is often accelerated with media figures. Just as feelings of intimacy can develop rapidly in two-sided social relationships in mediated environments (Walther, 1996), so too should people be able to develop close attachments in one-sided, pseudosocial relationships. In fact, thanks to the accessibility of media figures through celebrity news and gossip, narrative conventions (e.g., backstories and internal monologues), and fan practices (e.g., information seeking, media making, and communicating one's fandom to others), hyperpersonal intimacy with media figures is probably commonplace.

In a recent meta-analysis of studies of the effects of media exposure on intergroup relations, Banas et al. (2020) found that length of media exposure was unrelated to prejudice. Consequently, they suggested that it would be a mistake to believe that parasocial contact

can only occur after prolonged contact, and they pointed out that, much like people can experience "love at first sight" in their social lives, they might experience instantaneous interpersonal connection in their parasocial lives as well. However, research indicated that love at first sight experiences in interpersonal interactions are actually instances of intense physical attraction, devoid of intimacy and feelings of commitment (Zsok et al., 2017). This comparison underscores precisely why stimuli that do not provide enough breath or depth of personal information about a media figure are usually ill-equipped to facilitate a parasocial intergroup contact process. Media offerings that only permit audiences to develop a surface-level understanding of media figures are unlikely to provide the type of quality contact that triggers interpersonal liking and subsequent group categorization needed for audiences to generalize any of the media figures' positive characteristics to the outgroup at large (Pettigrew, 1998). Because longer media stimuli and exposure to media over time can foster increased feelings of togetherness, commitment, and intimacy (see Bond, 2021), we concede that greater time is certainly conducive to parasocial contact effects, but these effects are not *dependent* on time. So, we agree with Banas et al. (2020) that it is not necessary to have a lengthy exposure to develop a sense of knowing a media figure that results in desirable contact effects. As they pointed out, a single stand-up comedy television performance could be more than sufficient to make viewers feel connected enough to a comic for them to have a meaningful mediated intergroup encounter. But this is because stand-up comedians typically engage in extremely high levels of self-disclosure and affinity seeking, thereby enhancing the quality of the parasocial experience. It has nothing to do with time. A short media offering that provides more media figure self-disclosure, or signals more reciprocity or authenticity (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019, and Chapter 5 in this volume), could easily provide a more meaningful parasocial contact experience than a long-running series that only offers trivial details about the figure. A 15-minute stand-up comedy routine can offer more meaningful intergroup contact than a 1-hour portion of a six-episode miniseries.

To be clear, we recognize that even studies that do not use stimuli conducive to cultivating an intimate sense of engagement with a media figure can still provide convincing evidence that media exposure was associated with reductions in prejudice. We are simply questioning whether parasocial contact is the mechanism responsible for driving these effects. Of course, there is no litmus test for the quality of PSR stimuli, so it is incumbent on researchers to present compelling rationales for the media artifacts they use to stimulate parasocial relational intimacy.

Considering Mediators and Moderators of Intergroup Contact

Although there are several notable exceptions, most studies reviewed in this chapter focused on demonstrating that mediated contact effects exist, rather than explicating the processes through which various types of mediated intergroup contacts can operate through to affect intergroup relations. Moving forward, Harwood's (2010) contact space framework

offers a useful and instructive starting point for understanding how and why various types of media figure involvement should differentially impact key mediators and moderators of mediated contact on intergroup relations. The contact space theorizes that all types of intergroup contact (e.g., face-to-face contact, imagined contact, extended vicarious contact, parasocial contact) can be conceptualized along two dimensions: self-involvement (how much one's self is involved with the contact) and richness (how communicatively complex the experience is and how much it lends itself to feelings of presence and propinquity). Where the type of intergroup contact falls within the contact space determines its process variables (i.e., moderators, mediators).

In the contact space (Harwood, 2010), PSRs with outgroup characters are conceptualized as having relatively high richness because, perceptually speaking, contact with a media figure can be almost as rich as face-to-face contact. This type of media figure engagement is also high in self-involvement because the self is invested cognitively and emotionally involved in the relationship with the media character/figure. Vicarious contact through mediated exposure is similarly high in richness, but lower in terms of self-involvement, because, technically, in that scenario the contact is happening to someone else and the viewer is witnessing it. However, as previously noted, there is reason to believe that these processes can occur concurrently.

The contact space framework predicts that all types of intergroup contact can potentially reduce prejudice, with the moderators and mediators determined by where the form of intergroup falls along the two dimensions. For example, high-richness and high self-involvement forms of contact like parasocial contact should reduce prejudice indirectly through reduced experienced anxiety. But the mediator of vicarious contact (which is lower in self-involvement) on prejudice should be reductions in *anticipated* anxiety because, after all, the mediated intergroup interaction is experienced secondhand. The contact space framework also predicts that the moderators of these different media figure contact processes should vary according to where they fall on the richness and self-involvement continuums. For instance, because media experiences that are lower in richness are inherently less involving and require more audience engagement, it predicts that narrative transportation should be more likely to moderate (facilitate) vicarious contact effects than parasocial contact effects. These are just a few of the many well-conceived predictions Harwood made using the contact space framework, each of which still stands to be empirically tested.

Considering Intergroup Effects of Parasocial Interaction

Currently, the experience of parasocial interaction is not accounted for on the contact space, but there is good reason to expect that this other type of parasocial experience can also facilitate contact effects. Since the original propositions of parasocial contact (Schiappa et al., 2005, 2006), vicarious contact (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007), and the contact space framework research on parasocial experiences have become more refined by

drawing meaningful distinctions, in terms of both conceptualization and operationalization, between parasocial *relationships* (feelings of personal connection with a media figure that endures beyond media exposure) and parasocial *interaction* (an illusion of mutual awareness that occurs during media exposure) (Dibble et al., 2016; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Considering the emphasis of the interpersonal contact hypothesis on relationships (particularly cross-group friendships), it is not surprising that the preponderance of research on parasocial contact has focused on PSR intensity as the crux of parasocial contact effects. However, parasocial interaction could also be a catalyst for intergroup tolerance. Any production-related (e.g., a close-up) or performer-related verbal or nonverbal cue (e.g., direct eye contact) that enhances parasocial interaction could potentially intensify PSRs (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019) and therefore enhance parasocial contact effects.

The experience of parasocial interaction should have independent effects on outgroup perceptions as well. After all, intergroup contact is inherently about communicating (Allport, 1954; Harwood & Joyce, 2012) and *how* media figures communicate—whether they foster parasocial interaction by seeming engaged, authentic, willing to reciprocate, and socially accessible (E. L. Cohen & Tyler, 2016; Hartmann, 2008; Riles & Adams, 2021; see also Chapter 3 in this volume)—should inform audience perceptions of the media figure's group. A parasocial interaction is an illusion of two-way communication, and the feeling that a media figure is looking at you, speaking to you, and aware of you could intensify the intergroup behaviors they model and messages they send. For instance, parasocial interaction could induce viewer reactance (Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016). They can also make negative mediated encounters with outgroup personas seem more threatening and positive encounters seem more inviting and relaxed. Children's television shows such as *Dora the Explorer* rely heavily on conventions like direct address to make young viewers feel as though the characters are aware of them, which in turn is presumed to enhance any positive or negative effects of her character (see Chapter 7). Breves (2020) suggested as much in a study of parasocial contact in video games. In an experiment, White German players' exposure to a Black in-game character in the fantasy role-playing game *Skyrim* reduced their explicit bias toward Black people. However, this reduction was only statistically significant among players who experienced the game in three dimensions using a virtual reality headset, as opposed to a two-dimensional game console. The researcher theorized this is because the increased presence enhanced parasocial interaction. Considering the role of parasocial interaction in intergroup contact effects is a particularly important goal in light of the sustained popularity of microcelebrities and influencers on social media platforms such as YouTube. Because the media figures rely on direct bodily and verbal address to communicate with their audience in their self-created videos, and because these videos are serialized and are characterized by high levels of self-disclosure, microcelebrities can potentially wield considerable influence on people's perceptions of the social groups

they represent through forms of both PSR intensity and parasocial interaction. This is another ripe area for future research.

Considering Postexposure-Mediated Contact Effects

Additional research is also needed to understand the role of indirect contact that extends beyond initial mediated contact and how postexposure processing affects long-term intergroup impressions. Not long after research in the first studies on mediated intergroup contact, research on other forms of indirect contact with members of a social group began (see White et al., 2020). These studies demonstrated that, in some cases, simply imaging positive intergroup contact can be sufficient to reduce prejudice (Miles & Crisp, 2014). Concurrently, research on narrative engagement has begun to document how reflective imaginative processes that audiences engage in *after* consuming a story can influence what they take away from it (Slater et al., 2018). This is an important consideration because although the intergroup contact may often be initiated by the media, how people process that contact is a matter of how they imagine it or discuss it later. Accordingly, these two lines of research suggest that interventions that can help guide individuals interpret and process parasocial or vicarious mediated intergroup encounters could help to ensure that audiences focus on the desirable aspects of the encounters. After all, for long-term prejudice reduction, contact with an outgroup is only as good as people remember it. E. L. Cohen et al. (2018) showed that, after a dramatic, fictional depiction of a character with bipolar disorder, viewers who were randomly assigned to read a story epilogue that reinforced the message that people with bipolar disorder can lead productive lives were better able to correctly identify the subtext of the storyline and they expressed greater willingness to interact with people with bipolar disorder in the future. This finding suggests a possible need to supplement media that make intergroup issues salient with clarifying messages, when possible, and it speaks to potential utility of accompanying prompts, summaries, or guides to highlight the most positive characteristics of the outgroup or the mediated interaction and encourage positive imaginative contact.

Relatedly, there is also some evidence that the pace at which viewers consume narratives can affect how effective the stories are in reducing prejudice toward stigmatized groups. Billard (2019) found that viewers who watched one episode of *Transparent*, a show about a transgender woman, each week exhibited greater and longer lasting reductions in prejudice toward transgender people than those who binge-watched the same episodes back to back. This finding suggests that, in some cases, the success of parasocial or vicarious contact could be contingent on encouraging audiences to have an opportunity to reflect on these experiences in between encounters.

Considering Audiences in Disadvantaged Social Groups

Finally, media figure contact research needs to account for different effects of mediated intergroup contact on audiences that come from diverse social groups with diverse social

standing. The vast majority of this research reviewed in this chapter examined majority group responses to contact with marginalized groups in the media (e.g., heterosexuals' responses to homosexual characters or U.S. citizens' responses to interactions between a U.S. citizen and illegal Latinx immigrants). Very few studies have focused on how audiences in disadvantaged groups respond to portrayals of more advantaged media figures or even how they respond to portrayals of outgroup media figures with other marginalized identities. This oversight is a problem for the development of mediated intergroup contact theory broadly, because current research does not permit us to generalize with much confidence parasocial and vicarious contact effects to other groups. But more importantly, it also restricts our ability to identify the types of depictions that will create the types of mediated intergroup contact experiences that are the most advantageous for marginalized groups.

Hässler et al. (2020) explained that most of the existing theorizing on contact effects has had the goal of creating intergroup harmony at the expense of empowerment for marginalized social groups. They presented evidence that portrayals promoting cross-group tolerance, friendship, and common identities between advantaged and disadvantaged groups also dampens disadvantaged group members' willingness to advocate for and participate in social justice efforts. With their integrative contact-collective action model, they argued that (after establishing a climate of trust) intergroup contact interventions should not only emphasize commonalities between advantaged and disadvantaged groups but also emphasize inequities so that disadvantaged group members do not become complacent about social change. Considering vicarious contact effects, for example, it may be most advantageous for Native American viewers of the TV show *Yellowstone* to observe not only the bonds that Monica, the Native American character, shares with her White rancher in-laws, but also the numerous conflicts they have about culture, history, and privilege. Moving forward, any theorizing of media figure contact effects should not only be comprehensive enough to explain how diverse groups of people respond to different media figures, but also be just enough to inform and promote social change that is beneficial to the groups that have been most victimized by the prejudices that intergroup contact theory has always sought to remedy.

Notes

1. Specifically, Schiappa et al. (2005) referenced a "transvestite" comedian, but this terminology has since become derogatory.
2. Or, perhaps "parasocial contact" is a label that is too narrow. It may be more useful to refer to intergroup contact effects that occur as a result of any type of engagement with a media figure as something more general, such as "mediated direct contact" or "media persona contact."
3. This is not to be confused with social identification importance or the extent that viewers' social ingroup is incorporated into their self-concept.
4. Further in this chapter we make an argument that, generally, news reports are not a common source of parasocial contact, but because intergroup conflict is often considered to be newsworthy, news media provide many opportunities for vicarious contact. However, as noted previously, we see these as distinct theoretical processes.

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CHAPTER 13

PS and Identity Among LGBTQ Media Users

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Abstract

This chapter discusses how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals relate to media personae, focusing on the critical value of parasocial relationships (PSRs) with LGBTQ media personae for identity development, sense of belongingness, and validation. LGBTQ media users may be particularly prone to PSRs with LGBTQ media personae as compensation for offline, face-to-face social support from LGBTQ others. The chapter reviews what is known about the representation of LGBTQ fictional characters and celebrities in media, investigates the application of theory to LGBTQ PSRs, and details the function of social media influencers as specific media personae likely to attract LGBTQ audiences. Unanswered questions about the development and effects of PSRs among LGBTQ media users conclude this chapter.

Key Words: identity, minority stress theory, uses and gratifications, attachment, compensation hypothesis

Introduction

In a 1997 episode of the situation comedy *Ellen*, Ellen Morgan leaned over a podium in an airport lobby and disclosed to her love interest, Susan, that she was gay. Ellen's coming out was heard not only by Susan, but also by the 42 million viewers who tuned in to the episode that April evening. The episode marked a turning point: Ellen became the first openly gay protagonist on a network prime-time television series. Ellen DeGeneres, the actress playing Ellen Morgan, came out in tandem with the character, increasing the pop culture attention and newsworthiness of the historical media moment. Fourteen years later, gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants reflecting on their coming out experiences in a mixed-methods study referenced Ellen more than any other media personae, noting the impact that she had on their perceived support, sense of community, and identity validation (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). Ellen is a single example of a broader phenomenon, wherein media personae serve as important socialization companions for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people.

This chapter addresses the LGBTQ media landscape and the parasocial relationships (PSRs) of LGBTQ audiences, especially LGBTQ youth, who often rely on media

personae for social support during identity development and acceptance (Bond, 2018). "LGBTQ" is used throughout the chapter to reference individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender, nonbinary, or any other sexual or gender identity that falls outside of cisgender heteronormativity. It is worth acknowledging, however, that writing about LGBTQ people as a homogeneous entity is inherently problematic because it blurs the unique experiences of minoritized individuals, especially those with intersectional identities who are exceedingly marginalized for their sexual or gender identity in conjunction with identities related to race, ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic status, to name a few. When appropriate, attention is given to specific identities within the LGBTQ spectrum of sexual and gender identities.

Why Study the PSRs of LGBTQ People as a Specific Population of Media Users?

LGBTQ people, especially youth, are at a greater risk of emotional, psychological, and physical adversities than their cisgender heterosexual peers (Hart & Heimberg, 2001). These risks stem from the particularly arduous task of navigating sexual and gender identity development during the formidable yet fragile life span stage of adolescence. The discrimination and stigma intertwined with societal perceptions of LGBTQ identities are historical precursors to feelings of social isolation and ostracism among adolescents questioning their sexual or gender identities (Meyer, 2003; Mohr & Kendra, 2011). Though public opinion about LGBTQ people has progressively become more tolerant in many societies, nearly 80% of LGBTQ youth in a contemporary U.S. national survey reported feeling depressed or down in the prior week, and almost 70% reported that they had overheard important people in their lives make negative comments about LGBTQ people (Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2018). Moreover, LGBTQ youth remain twice as likely as cisgender heterosexual youth to have felt excluded by their peers (HRC, 2012) and five times as likely to report suicidal ideation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016).

LGBTQ-inclusive entertainment media may be particularly important for validating LGBTQ identities and creating a sense of belongingness among LGBTQ youth. Media personae serve as socialization companions for LGBTQ youth, providing them with information and entertainment (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000). LGBTQ youth frequently cite movies, television series, podcasts, websites, and social media platforms as the most important sources of positive messages about LGBTQ identities (Bond, 2018; HRC, 2012). Studies also suggest that when LGBTQ youth are engaged with meaningful media, they are inclined to develop PSRs with their favorite media personae (Bond, 2018). Examining LGBTQ media users who experience heightened obstacles to developing strong social relationships with like-others not only sheds light on the PSR experience, but also may reinforce or challenge theories used to explain and predict the role of PSRs in the perceived social networks of audiences.

Theoretical Perspectives on PSRs of LGBTQ Media Users

The uses-and-gratifications perspective, attachment styles, and the parasocial compensation hypothesis have been used to explain how LGBTQ people are particularly prone to developing PSRs and what function PSRs serve for this respective audience. Alternatively, the minority stress theory has not often been applied to PSR research, but affords great insight into the value of PSRs for LGBTQ audiences. Each is dissected and applied to PSRs below.

Uses and Gratifications

The uses-and-gratifications perspective has been used to explain audience motivations for developing PSRs with media personae. The uses-and-gratifications perspective assumes that people are driven to actively select media that will gratify needs emanating from people's social environments (Rubin, 2009). Media are seen as functional alternatives to other forms of communication. Social psychological factors will determine how audiences engage with media to gratify needs. Two functions of media use that are often cited in typologies of uses and gratifications are identity and companionship (also see Chapters 18 and 10, respectively).

Identity Needs. Harwood (1999) argued that social identity gratification can be a salient motivation for media selection such that media users seek out messages that depict positive portrayals of characters with whom audiences share identity attributes. In his exploration of social identity gratification, Harwood (1999) found that emerging adults who strongly identified with their age demographic were more likely to reinforce this aspect of their sense of self through media selection than those who less strongly identified with their age. This finding was largely reinforced by Abrams and Giles (2007) in their examination of African American participants' selection of Black-inclusive television for social identity gratifications.

The social identity needs of LGBTQ people may explain why studies suggest that LGBTQ audiences actively search for media inclusive of LGBTQ characters and storylines (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Winderman & Smith, 2016), especially during adolescence when sexual and gender identities are most likely under construction. Models that explain LGBTQ identity development typically present sequential stages that include sensitization (i.e., feeling different), exploration of sensitization, internal acceptance, and integration of the accepted identity into other aspects of the lived experience (see Rosario et al., 2008). It is during exploration when adolescents actively search for information that could be utilized to understand, label, and articulate their sexual or gender identities. Youth report that fear of abandonment prevents them from relying on family, teachers, or peers as resources (HRC, 2012; McConnell et al., 2016). Media, however, provide a window to the queer world that is perceived as safe and accessible.

Bond (2018) found that LGBTQ youth were more likely to seek information and guidance about a wide range of social issues (i.e., religion, school, social lives, substance use, romantic relationships, and sex) from their favorite media personae than from interpersonal sources of information like families or community members. Cisgender heterosexual youth, however, were more likely to cite families and community members as important sources of information and guidance than media personae. These findings arguably support the uses-and-gratifications perspective as it relates to PSRs. LGBTQ youth trust in their favorite LGBTQ media personae for information and guidance because of their perceived similarity, which in turn helps LGBTQ youth navigate their identities.

Need for Companionship. There are interpersonal dimensions to media narratives, and media personae can gratify the need for media users' companionship by providing audiences with representations of personhood with whom to develop connections. The parasocial compensation hypothesis predicts that PSRs can serve as functional alternatives to social relationships. The parasocial compensation hypothesis has typically been studied by attempting to correlate self-reported trait loneliness with PSR strength, under the assumption that people who report more loneliness may build strong socioemotional bonds with media personae to compensate for relational deficiencies. Studies investigating correlations between self-reported trait loneliness and PSR strength have found mixed results (see Chapter 10). However, studies that have taken a more nuanced approach to measuring the compensatory function of PSRs have found support for the hypothesis. For example, Derrick and colleagues (2009) found that asking participants to think about their favorite television programs helped to impede loneliness and increase feelings of belongingness, a finding described by the researchers as social surrogacy. Studies have reinforced social surrogacy by revealing positive correlations between participants' need to belong, desire to feel included, and PSRs (Rosaen & Dibble, 2016; Tsay & Bodine, 2012). Madison and colleagues (2016) suggested that PSRs serve a compensatory function when audiences engage in imagined interactions with their favorite media personae to play out real-life situations. Rehearsal as a dimension of parasocial compensation is particularly applicable to LGBTQ audiences, who report using media to help them rehearse crucial developmental tasks like coming out (Craig & McInroy, 2014) or to experiment with romantic relationships (Tukachinsky Forster, 2021).

Attachment Theory

The gratification that PSRs with media personae may provide LGBTQ people can also be explained by Bowlby's (1973) attachment styles. The theoretical underpinning of attachment styles argues that early childhood experiences with caregivers create working models of intimacy with others that individuals then apply to future relational contexts. According to the attachment styles perspective, the availability and accessibility of caregiver affection during childhood manifest into two dimensions of adult relationship styles: anxiety

(i.e., strong need for relational intimacy, validation, and reassurance) and avoidance (i.e., strong need for solitude, self-agency, and personal strength). Low levels of anxiety and avoidance equate to secure attachment, which is correlated with warm, healthy bonding without the fear of abandonment (Bowlby, 1973).

Studies have found that attachment styles not only can predict relational outcomes in reciprocal face-to-face contexts, but also can predict the worth assigned to PSRs. People high in attachment anxiety consistently report stronger PSRs with media personae (Rain & Mar, 2021, and Chapter 10 this volume). While this correlation has been documented with general population samples, the relationship between attachment style and PSRs is particularly relevant to LGBTQ media users. LGBTQ people are more likely to have attachment anxiety than avoidance or secure styles (Starks & Parsons, 2014). Thus, LGBTQ people who may have a strong need for relational closeness (i.e., attachment anxiety) are likely to benefit from the socioemotional bonds with media personae that are characteristic of PSRs.

A commonly cited explanation for the high likelihood of LGBTQ people having anxious attachment styles is rooted in internalized homophobia. Internalized homophobia occurs when LGBTQ people have negative feelings toward themselves, a consequence of societal intolerance. In essence, LGBTQ people are not immune to negative perceptions of LGBTQ people. Scholars argue that internalized homophobia is a strong predictor of attachment anxiety, likely because internalized homophobia prevents LGBTQ people from feeling that they are worthy of successful relationships (Sherry, 2007). Winderman and Smith (2016) found a positive relationship between internalized homophobia and being motivated to view LGBTQ-inclusive media for information. LGBTQ people who experience high levels of internalized homophobia may then also rely heavily on LGBTQ media personae for companionship. Internalized homophobia is considered a proximal stressor for LGBTQ people in the minority stress theory, a sociopsychological perspective that can also predict the value of PSRs for LGBTQ people.

Minority Stress Theory

Minority stress theory assumes that people with minoritized identities must navigate unique stressors in addition to baseline stressors experienced by everyone (Meyer, 2003). For LGBTQ people, these stressors manifest from living in a heteronormative society that fears gender or sexuality variance, resulting in stigmatization and discrimination against LGBTQ identities. The theory posits that there are two distinct types of unique stressors experienced by minoritized people: distal and proximal. Distal stressors are external. For LGBTQ people, distal stressors would include discrimination, ostracism, and violence. Proximal stressors are internal. These would include internalized homophobia, concealing sexual or gender identity from others, or fear of rejection. The theory predicts that these unique stressors contribute to psychological distress for LGBTQ individuals, but that this relationship can be moderated by social support from relational others (Meyer, 2003).

Research supports this premise, as perceived social support from close friends, teachers, and family have all been linked to lower psychological distress, loneliness, and depressive symptoms among LGBTQ youth (McConnell et al., 2016; Watson et al., 2019).

Though social support from relational others is vital to reducing the influence of unique stressors associated with minoritized identities, LGBTQ adolescents often fear rejection or ostracism from families, teachers, and peers (Diamond & Lucas, 2004). Consequently, the social support that LGBTQ youth receive from their network of important others may not satisfy their needs, increasing the potential salience of media personae to the social networks of LGBTQ young people. According to minority stress, LGBTQ youth could be depending on their on-screen friends to provide them sexual or gender-related support if they are lacking said support from their offline peers.

Empirical Research on PSRs Among LGBTQ Media Users

As discussed above, a number of theoretical approaches point at the potential importance that PSRs can play in the lives of LGBTQ individuals for identity validation, companionship, attachment, and social support. Several studies provide empirical support for these assertions.

LGBTQ participants consistently report identity and social motivations for seeking out LGBTQ-inclusive media content, consistent with uses and gratifications (Winderman & Smith, 2016). One experimental study helped to shed light on the value of queer media narratives. Gillig and Murphy (2016) exposed LGBTQ youth to storyline highlights depicting a young gay romance on the hit Freeform series *The Fosters* (2013–2018). Participants were more likely to report hope and stronger positive attitudes toward LGBTQ people as their ingroup than a no-exposure control (Gillig & Murphy, 2016). The findings shed light on the social identity needs that can be met by developing PSRs with LGBTQ media personae.

Bond (2018) examined PSRs among not only LGBTQ youth, but also cisgender heterosexual youth for comparison purposes. LGBTQ adolescents were more likely to select LGBTQ media personae as their favorites, particularly if they lacked real-life LGBTQ peers with whom they felt close. There was also significant variance in the favorite media personae of LGBTQ youth, suggesting that other factors likely play into how LGBTQ youth develop social–emotional connections with their liked fictional characters and celebrities. Media exposure, perceived similarity, and attraction were positively correlated with PSRs regardless of participants' sexual or gender identities. Loneliness, however, was only positively associated with PSRs for LGBTQ adolescents. McCutcheon and colleagues (2021) found similar results with a sample of LGBTQ youth from the Philippines. LGBTQ participants who reported higher levels of loneliness were more likely to experience higher levels of admiration for their favorite celebrities compared to heterosexual participants with higher levels of loneliness. These studies suggest that the compensatory function of PSRs may be more applicable to niche audiences than to the

general population, a premise supported by the knowledge that LGBTQ youth strive for interpersonal intimacy without the fear of rejection (Diamond & Lucas, 2004).

Interpersonal intimacy may be extended to parasocial romance as well. In her extensive examination of parasocial romantic relationships (PSRRs), Tukachinsky Forster (2021) noted that LGBTQ youth often develop their first romantic connections with same-gendered media personae. Romantic experimentation with media personae is common regardless of sexual or gender identity. However, imagined interactions and romantic rehearsal with PSRRs may be an even more attractive alternative to real-life experimentation for LGBTQ youth given the stigma and marginalization attached to same-gendered attraction or the lack of real-life opportunities for many LGBTQ youth. As noted by Tukachinsky Forster (2021), one gay man's PSRR at the age of 14 reinforced his accepted sexuality and afforded him "a fanciful sexual experience as a substitution for the sexual experimentation that he could not experience in real life" (p. 74).

PSRs as Social Support on Social Media

Though the emerging literature on PSRs among LGBTQ media users has primarily investigated legacy screen media, LGBTQ youth articulate that social media provides vastly more opportunities for exploration, information, and companionship than television, film, or print (McInroy & Craig, 2017). Bond and Miller (2021) conducted a mixed-methods study with a sample of nearly 500 LGBTQ participants (11 to 74 years old). They found that exposure to LGBTQ YouTube vloggers was positively correlated with social connectedness among participants who had shared their LGBTQ identities with others and who also reported the lowest levels of social support. That is, LGBTQ individuals who were open about their sexual or gender identity but did not feel that their face-to-face peers were meeting their support needs found the most value in developing connections with LGBTQ YouTube vloggers, further stressing the value of social media to provide a digital space for companionship. The study also included open-ended questions asking participants about the type of content they viewed on YouTube and their motivations for viewing YouTube. Half of the participants stated that they sought out LGBTQ-inclusive content on YouTube. Nearly half of participants (42%) also reported that they used YouTube for social connection, the second most cited motivation behind entertainment (48%). One participant in the study noted that regularly viewing LGBTQ YouTube vloggers was "like visiting old friends" (Bond & Miller, 2021, p. 14), symbolic for the parasocial bond that had been developed with favorite LGBTQ YouTube vloggers. Other participants described LGBTQ YouTube vloggers as "people I know" or "great people with genuine personalities," language indicative of PSRs (p. 17).

Social media platforms play a critical role in the lives of LGBTQ youth, providing an opportunity to experiment with identities, connections, and communities in a digital space that is accessible and perceived to be safe (Bates et al., 2020; McInroy et al., 2019). Less than 20% of LGBTQ youth participate in LGBTQ community groups, yet over 50%

participate in the same type of forum online (HRC, 2012). Social media can be particularly important for those who do not see themselves reflected in mainstream screen media (Bond & Miller, 2021; McInroy & Craig, 2017), as more diverse representations of LGBTQ identities can build resilience, create connections, and teach coping strategies (Fox & Ralston, 2016). Though some social media platforms connect LGBTQ users with like-others for computer-mediated interpersonal communication, other spaces are highly likely to provide users with opportunities to develop PSRs. For example, social media like YouTube that use video features are prime for PSR exploration. Many YouTube vloggers film their videos from their homes, engage with the camera head on at eye level, and disclose to their viewers in a confessional-style presentation. Filming environment, eye gaze, and camera angle are just a few of the features of YouTube vlogger videos that make them fruitful for PSR development (Kurtin et al., 2018), which may explain the popularity of social media platforms with LGBTQ youth seeking companionship from like-others (Fox & Ralston, 2016).

PSRs During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The crucial role that social media play in the perceived social networks of LGBTQ youth was most evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. A nascent but growing group of studies have investigated how the drastic changes to social engagements that took place during the height of the pandemic have influenced vulnerable populations like LGBTQ people. Recall the assumptions of minority stress theory here: Social support can buffer the negative influence of additional stressors experienced by LGBTQ people. The pandemic inserted obstacles to maintaining social support for many LGBTQ young people. Fish and colleagues (2020) found that the pandemic detached many LGBTQ young people from their safe spaces such as schools or community groups, which decreased social support options and increased feelings of social isolation in home environments, especially if parents were perceived as less supportive. The social isolation that resulted from social distancing and quarantining increased the salience of companionship gratified through PSRs (Fish et al., 2020; Woznicki et al., 2021).

Research studies suggested that LGBTQ emerging adults who were living with their parents during the COVID-19 pandemic relied on their PSRs to maintain their emotional well-being. Woznicki and colleagues (2021) found that the correlation between PSR strength and well-being was moderated by LGBTQ participants' family support and loneliness during the pandemic. Hiebert and Kortes-Miller (2021) concluded in their ethnographic analysis of TikTok videos that the social media platform was a resource for LGBTQ youth to garner support for difficult family situations and to maintain some sense of belonging while quarantined during the pandemic.

Relational Challenges in PSRs of LGBTQ People

The previous sections explicated the importance of PSRs for LGBTQ people, discussing the various gratifications that they can derive from these experiences and how PSRs can

address their social and psychological needs. Despite the potential positive influence of media personae on LGBTQ people's perceived social networks, the problematic representation of LGBTQ media personae suggests possible hindrances to PSR development between LGBTQ audiences and LGBTQ media personae. This section discusses trends in media depictions of LGBTQ characters and celebrities and the challenges that these portrayals present for LGBTQ media users' PSRs.

First, there are limited opportunities to form PSRs with LGBTQ characters. Early content analyses quantifying LGBTQ representation consistently found that LGBTQ characters were rare on television (Fisher et al., 2007; Fouts & Inch, 2005; Raley & Lucas, 2006). Though more recent studies suggest that progress is being made in this regard (GLAAD, 2021), increased frequency of representation is not uniform across sexual and gender identities. For instance, bisexual characters (particularly male ones) are still underrepresented in entertainment media (GLAAD, 2021). This scarcity of representation makes it harder for bisexual people to develop PSRs with like-others.

Second, the quality of PSRs can be limited by the nature of the LGBTQ representation. Even when LGBTQ characters are present, they tend to be siloed in their depiction, such that there is typically one LGBTQ character in any storyline or cast (GLAAD, 2021). This tokenism limits the variance and diversity in representation to homogeneous, stereotypical depictions of sexual and gender minorities (Annati & Ramsey, 2022; McInroy & Craig, 2017). Entertainment media tend to portray LGBTQ individuals as affluent, White gay men who are depicted either as nonsexual, heteronormative, and vocationally successful or as flamboyant, over-the-top clowns (e.g., Jack in the NBC hit series *Will & Grace*, 1998–2006, 2017–2020). When sexual or gender identities of LGBTQ characters are addressed, they often serve as fodder for laughs (Bond, 2014; Fouts & Inch, 2005; Raley & Lucas, 2006). LGBTQ characters' sexuality is "ornamental" (Bond, 2014)—LGBTQ characters are stripped of their sexualities and of the social obstacles inherent to their sexual or gender identities. They can be labeled LGBTQ, but their queerness often ends at proclamation, as they then assimilate to cisgender and heterosexual norms offering sanitized imagery that is tailored to heterosexual audiences (Bond, 2014; Itzkoff, 2010). Esposito (2009) referred to the trend as "dequeering," writing that assimilating LGBTQ characters does a disservice to LGBTQ audiences by presenting an inauthentic experience.

In other words, LGBTQ characters are designed with heterosexual cisgender audience needs in mind, consequently offering poor PSR targets for the LGBTQ viewers exposed to these representations. Mainstream media creators will often lure LGBTQ viewers with false promises of offering LGBTQ characters. This practice, known as queerbaiting, is defined as characters, images, or storylines hinting at forthcoming positive representations of queerness without ever delivering on the subtexts (Fathallah, 2015). A classic example of queerbaiting was the representation of Xena and her best friend Gabrielle on the fantasy drama *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001). Audiences were led to believe that Xena and Gabrielle were in love, but their romance was never explicitly depicted. Queerbaiting

could produce psychological distress for LGBTQ audiences, who feel invalidated by presumed LGBTQ characters who never articulate their perceived sexual or gender identities for the audience (Fathallah, 2015; Hirshfield & Stotler, 2020).

Considering the stereotypical, sanitized, and tokenistic nature of LGBTQ representations, how do LGBTQ audiences navigate their PSRs with these characters? Research suggested that LGBTQ audiences are cognizant of the common stereotypes and tropes that are present in mainstream entertainment media (McInroy & Craig, 2017). Yet, problematic representation does not seem to prevent PSRs from developing between LGBTQ audiences and LGBTQ media personae. LGBTQ emerging adults reported in an interview study that they perceived traditional screen media to be fraught with unidimensional representations of queerness, and that many of the LGBTQ characters in situation comedies and dramas on network television lack the authenticity and lived experience of LGBTQ people (McInroy & Craig, 2017). No participant in the study was able to identify a single fictional character or celebrity that they thought "stood out as meeting the desired level of complexity" that the participants hoped to see onscreen (p. 43). Regardless of the ornamental sexuality or dequeering of LGBTQ media personae, participants reported that they still found value in the less-than-ideal representations, especially when the participants were first integrating their sexual or gender identities into their lives (e.g., coming out). Such a finding reinforces the importance of LGBTQ media personae as social companions for LGBTQ audiences: Inauthentic or problematic representation was better than no representation. The simple presence of LGBTQ characters was enough to increase validation and a sense of belonging for LGBTQ participants in McInroy and Craig's (2017) interview study, likely due to a lack of LGBTQ peers and role models in their lived experiences.

PSRs With LGBTQ Media Personae Among Cisgender Heterosexual Media Users

Though the focus of this chapter is on LGBTQ people and their PSRs, LGBTQ media personae have the potential to also influence cisgender heterosexual audiences. Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man elected to public office in the United States, often urged gay and lesbian supporters at political rallies and protests to disclose their sexualities to family and friends. Milk claimed that the key to social inclusion for LGBTQ people was for the cisgender heterosexual majority to learn that they were already engaged in interpersonal relations with people who identified as LGBTQ (Fitzsimons, 2018). He believed that negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people would dissipate if heterosexual individuals were made aware that their social networks included LGBTQ family members, friends, and neighbors. Milk was essentially preaching the principal assumption of interpersonal contact theory: Attitudes toward an outgroup can be improved through positive interactions with members of the respective outgroup (Allport, 1954).

What Milk overlooked, however, was the potential impact his own presence in the media may have had on heterosexual audiences' attitudes toward gay men. Developing social connections with members of an outgroup only known through the media may have similar prejudice reduction effects as direct interpersonal contact, a phenomenon referred to as parasocial contact (Schiappa et al., 2005, and Chapter 12). Viewing LGBTQ television characters has been negatively correlated with homonegativity (Sink & Mastro, 2018), and experimental research tracking the development of cisgender heterosexual participants' PSRs with LGBTQ fictional characters has provided causal evidence for parasocial contact's benefit: The strength of PSRs with LGBTQ characters predicted reduced homonegativity over time (Bond, 2021).

Investigating means by which to alleviate LGBTQ prejudices through PSRs is an important endeavor given that negative attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities not only can induce direct harassment that can have detrimental consequences for the health and well-being of LGBTQ individuals (Berlan et al., 2010), but also can influence public policies related to LGBTQ discrimination and hate. Future research should continue to investigate PSRs with stigmatized outgroups. Though research studies suggest that parasocial contact can reduce prejudices, less is known about the willingness of cisgender heterosexual audiences to voluntarily view content inclusive of LGBTQ identities. If PSRs with LGBTQ characters can reduce homonegativity, then studies need to examine the means by which entertainment media can draw those audiences into LGBTQ-inclusive content.

Directions for Future Research

There are many areas for future research to continue dissecting PSRs among LGBTQ audiences and to learn about PSR development and maintenance by studying minoritized groups like LGBTQ people. For example, studies showed that individuals are more likely to be attracted to media personae of the same gender; this is particularly true of male children and adolescents (Hoffner, 2011). However, LGBTQ people do not seem as bound to rigid gender norms in their PSRs. Gay men are more likely to report female favorite media personae than heterosexual men, and lesbian women are more likely to report male favorite media personae than heterosexual women (Bond, 2018; Zsila et al., 2021). Gender may play less of a role in determining attraction to a media character for LGBTQ people who do not identify with societal standards of cisgender heteronormativity. This is particularly the case for gender-variant individuals. Individuals who identify as transgender, gender-fluid, nonbinary, and other gender-variant identities have been found to utilize digital spaces to connect with like-others and to increase social connectedness (Austin et al., 2020), yet no research has investigated PSRs as underlying mechanisms that could predict the value of media for gender-variant individuals. This area of study is particularly fruitful for future research given the politicization of gender-variant identities and the culture wars taking place over tolerance of gender-variant identities.

Future research should also specifically investigate PSRs among bisexual individuals as a unique population within the LGBTQ community (McCutcheon et al., 2021). Bisexual people are often stigmatized by gay men and lesbian women for their other-sex attractions and stigmatized by heterosexual people for their same-sex attractions. Though bisexual identities are vastly underrepresented in entertainment media (Johnson, 2016), the double stigma often faced by bisexual individuals may make their PSRs particularly crucial to social connectedness and support.

PSR research has also consistently found that people are more likely to develop PSRs with media personae who they find similar to themselves (Hoffner, 2011). Yet, LGBTQ audiences often report PSRs with animated or fantastical characters who are not bound by the limits of the real world (Hirshfield & Stotler, 2020). For example, superheroes like Superman (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011) and fantasy protagonists like Harry Potter (Nylund, 2007) are frequently cited as favorite media personae among LGBTQ people. The character arcs of many superheroes and fantasy characters invoke the overcoming adversity archetype that LGBTQ audiences can easily appropriate and, in turn, find similar to their own experiences. Harry Potter, for example, was an outcast who was not accepted by his family. He did not find himself and his happiness until he navigated his way out from under the stairs and into an alternative world full of others who shared his secret trait; texts like these are read by LGBTQ audiences as if they are intended for them (Nylund, 2007). Fantasy and sci-fi genres allow characters like Potter to challenge norms without affecting the authenticity of the representation (Hirshfield & Stotler, 2020). Arguably, LGBTQ audiences are interpreting these media personae in alternative ways that can create personal meaning for them, potentially increasing perceived similarity and attraction (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011), two key variables often correlated with PSRs (Hoffner, 2011), even among LGBTQ audiences (Bond, 2018). In a similar vein, audiences may be developing PSRs with characters that they interpret as queer, but the creators are actually engaged in queerbaiting. Understanding the absence of gratification from queer-read characters who are used to queerbait LGBQ audiences would also add useful insight into the similarity dimension of PSRs, particularly among marginalized media users.

This chapter has focused on PSRs developed between LGBTQ media users and *liked* media personae who may increase belongingness and validation for LGBTQ audiences. However, audiences can experience negative PSRs with media personae as well (Jennings & Alper, 2016; see Chapter 12). Given the stereotypical, unidimensional depictions of LGBTQ characters that are commonly depicted on television and in film (Bond, 2014; Fisher et al., 2007; Raley & Lucas, 2006), LGBTQ audiences may experience dislike while viewing, but maintain PSR bonds given the lack of social or parasocial alternatives (see Gray, 2021; Chapter 17). For example, a lesbian participant in Annati and Ramsey's (2022) study of stereotypical media portrayals noted: "I look for lesbian characters in shows, but then I'm stuck watching shows I'm not even interested in, in order to see

lesbian characters" (p. 326). Click and Tukachinsky argue in Chapter 17 that media users may maintain PSRs even if they find them unsatisfying if they feel they cannot afford to lose the PSR bond. Given that LGBTQ media users often seek identity needs and companionship from their favorite LGBTQ media personae that they lack in their face-to-face relationships (Bond, 2018), further investigating the prevalence of negative PSRs and PSR alternatives seems promising.

The application of the parasocial compensation hypothesis to minoritized or stigmatized populations is one additional area that requires future investment by PSR scholars. If LGBTQ youth are developing strong PSRs with media personae as compensation for a lack of real-life social connection with other LGBTQ individuals (Bond, 2018), then scholars should investigate the potential influence of this compensatory behavior on future social development. Tukachinsky Forster (2021) noted that adolescents' romantic experimentation with media personae is healthy rehearsal for real-life romantic endeavors in adulthood. Whether PSRs with LGBTQ media personae function in a similar manner or potentially stunt LGBTQ people's ability to form strong social bonds with offline others in adulthood is unknown. Developmental PSR research that dissects PSRs across the life span would shed light on the long-term outcome of compensation.

The media landscape has substantially evolved since Ellen Morgan *and* Ellen DeGeneres made headlines by coming out. Today, television screens are speckled with LGBTQ characters, and digital spaces provide endless opportunities for developing one-sided friendships with TikTok stars and YouTube vloggers alike. Investigating PSRs among LGBTQ people will remain crucial to understanding identity development and to strategizing how media narratives can contribute to the well-being of LGBTQ people, especially as the accessibility and representation of LGBTQ media personae continue to evolve.

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PART V

PS Experiences in Persuasion and Strategic Communication

CHAPTER

14

Effects of Parasocial Experiences on Health Outcomes

Cynthia A. Hoffner *and* Elizabeth L. Cohen

Abstract

This chapter synthesizes research on the influence of parasocial experiences in audience health-related perceptions and behavior. Exposure to health messages may be part of routine media use or result from active seeking of health-related information and guidance. Drawing on research in the domains of entertainment–education, media figure health events, and strategic health messaging, this review discusses theoretical mechanisms of parasocial influence on health outcomes, including message salience and issue involvement, diffusion, modeling, overcoming resistance, social norms, and source credibility. After reviewing research on specific health outcomes (including physical disease awareness, prevention, and treatment; mental health/mental illness; everyday health behaviors; social connection and well-being; and public health outcomes), the chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

Key Words: celebrity, health, entertainment–education, social norms, modeling

Introduction

Media figures play a critical role in media effects on health via health portrayals in narratives, health-related events involving public figures, and other forms of persuasive messages (e.g., Beck et al., 2014; Chew et al., 2019; Kresovich & Noar, 2020; Wang & Singhal, 2021). Exposure to health messages may be part of routine media use or result from active seeking of health-related information and guidance. Extensive evidence shows that actions, statements, and observed experiences of media figures can alter public awareness, interest, attitudes, and behaviors related to health issues, and these outcomes are enhanced by audience involvement with the media figure (Noar et al., 2014). In research on persuasive influence of media figures, "involvement" is often used as an umbrella term for a variety of feelings or orientations toward those figures, including liking/affinity, perceived similarity, identification, wishful identification and parasocial engagement (Brown, 2021).

This chapter focuses specifically on health effects of one category of involvement: parasocial experiences (PSEs).[1] We begin by briefly reviewing three of the most common

research approaches to understanding the role of PSEs in health, including entertainment–education (E-E), media figure health events, and strategic health messaging. We next consider some key theoretical mechanisms that explain the role of PSEs in health influence and then review research that has examined PSEs in several specific types of health outcomes. Finally, we conclude with suggestions for refining and expanding research in these areas.

Approaches to Understanding the Role of PSEs in Health Outcomes

There are several different but overlapping branches of research on audience involvement with media figures that share an interest in the role of PSEs in health outcomes. This section reviews three of the approaches that have yielded the most work on the role of PSEs in health outcomes: E-E, media figure health events, and strategic health messaging.

Entertainment–Education

Research on E-E has fueled much of the interest in how media figure involvement is related to health outcomes (Sood et al., 2017). E-E is a field that focuses on how entertaining media messages—narratives in particular—can encourage audiences to adopt healthy lifestyle attitudes and behaviors. Many E-E programs were designed specifically to promote health behavior change, but E-E also includes health messages embedded in traditional entertainment content, such as TV series and games. For example, an episode of the TV series *Black-ish* addressed the topic of preeclampsia, focusing on the experiences of a popular lead character on the show (Bowen, 2017).

Entertainment–education theory and research are rooted in Bandura's (1986) theorizing about vicarious learning through the observation of role models, including role models featured in media (Wang & Singhal, 2021). So appropriately, many of the mechanisms that are thought to drive E-E effects are related to how audiences engage with the characters. Over the years, scholarship in E-E has increasingly relied on theoretical approaches to entertainment, such as the entertainment overcoming resistance model (EORM; Moyer-Gusé, 2008), narrative transportation theory (e.g., Murphy et al., 2011), and the emotional flow hypothesis (e.g., Ophir et al., 2021), to understand the process of health influence through entertainment narratives. At its core, the E-E perspective rests on the assumption that if health messages are packaged in media experiences that are involving and enjoyable, they are in a unique position to influence audience perceptions and behaviors. PSE with media characters is one type of narrative response that is theorized to enhance this process (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

Public Figure Health Events

Public figures such as celebrities and political leaders are highly visible, evoke strong emotional responses, and are a part of the vicarious social experience we share with others (Stever, 2017). As such, involvement of public figures in health issues is an important

way that health information reaches and affects the public. Public figure health events are announcements or news reports about personal health experiences of public figures, such as disease diagnoses, medical procedures, health challenges, and death (Noar et al., 2014). Many public figures also undertake efforts to promote health issues that they or close family have experienced (Beck et al., 2014). For example, health announcements by celebrities such as Magic Johnson and Angelina Jolie led to their involvement in long-term advocacy efforts, and the impact of their activism was undoubtedly bolstered by audience members' PSEs with them (Brown & Basil, 1995; Kosenko et al., 2016). Following Carrie Fisher's death, parasocial relationships (PSRs) with Fisher appeared to facilitate sharing about mental health by fans on social media, which likely amplified her antistigma mental health advocacy by reaching others who felt connected to her (Hoffner, 2020; Park & Hoffner, 2020).

Extensive research has documented the health-related outcomes associated with the publicized health experiences of public figures, such as Magic Johnson, Nancy Reagan, Katie Couric, Carrie Fisher, Steve Jobs, Angelia Jolie, Charlie Sheen, and Hugh Jackman (Brown & Basil, 1995; Cram et al., 2003; Francis et al., 2019; Hoffner, 2020; Kosenko et al., 2016; Myrick et al., 2013; Nattinger et al., 1998; Rahmani et al., 2018). These health outcomes include increasing awareness, motivating information seeking and interpersonal communication, and altering attitudes and behaviors (Noar et al., 2014; Myrick, 2017a). PSEs are one of several types of involvement that can enhance the effects of public figure health events (e.g., Brown & de Matviuk, 2010; Cohen & Hoffner, 2016; Hoffner & Lane, 2021).

Strategic Health Messaging

Strategic health communication efforts, via health campaigns, public service announcements, and other initiatives, typically utilize people as message sources, role models, or normative influences (Bandura, 2004; Hocevar et al., 2017). In marketing and advertising related to health, celebrities and social media influencers endorse or promote products and practices—such as exercise routines, diets, medications, snack foods, and beverages—that can have health consequences (e.g., Daniel et al., 2018; del Río Carral et al., 2022; De Veirman et al., 2019; Folkvord et al., 2020; Phua et al., 2018). The common focus on media figures in these approaches connects to understanding the role of PSEs in strategic health messaging.

Celebrity spokespersons can partake in strategic health promotion efforts, including public service announcements and social marketing campaigns. Health campaigns often feature familiar media figures that many in the target audience already feel a connection to, especially celebrities (e.g., Knoll & Matthes, 2017; Meng et al., 2015; Wen & Wu, 2018). For example, the Time to Change campaign in the United Kingdom featured popular celebrities discussing their mental health experiences in an effort to lower stigma associated with mental illness (Evans-Lacko et al., 2014). Governments and public health organizations recently used social media influencers in campaigns to encourage COVID-19

vaccination and counter misinformation about vaccination (e.g., Lorenz, 2021). Similar techniques have been used with younger audiences, featuring popular characters and mascots (Kraak & Story, 2015). For example, one study with children aged 4–6 suggested that media characters that children presumably had PSRs with (e.g., Dora the Explorer) may increase the persuasive influence of health-related public service announcements (de Droog et al., 2012).

Importantly, however, involvement with celebrities and social media influencers may also increase adverse outcomes when they share health misinformation or endorse or promote risky or unhealthy behaviors, such as using e-cigarettes or eating junk food (e.g., Folkvord et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; Myrick & Erlichman, 2020; Phua et al., 2018). At times, media figures intentionally spread health misinformation, and the degree to which their messages are accepted and shared undoubtedly varies based on a range of factors, including their perceived credibility and audience involvement with them (Borah et al., 2022).

Theoretical Explanations for Influence of PSEs on Health Outcomes

Despite the wealth of research documenting the effects of PSEs (Tukachinsky et al., 2020), relatively few studies have tested the theoretical mechanisms underlying these effects. There are several reasons *why* PSEs can be expected to enhance the influence of media figures on health. Given the similarity of these one-sided, pseudosocial experiences to our two-sided, genuinely social experiences, it should come as no surprise that mechanisms through which people's PSEs influence their health are parallel to the ways in which people's actual social contacts influence their health. Yet there are differences as well, related to the contexts in which people encounter media figures and the unique characteristics of PSEs.

Many of the approaches apply across contexts. For instance, social cognitive theory (SCT) can explain effects of entertainment narratives, celebrity health announcements, and strategic health messaging (e.g., public service announcements and health campaigns). At the same time, multiple theories can illuminate different mechanisms underlying a given media effect. For example, the effects of PSEs with celebrities in health campaigns can be explained by theories of source influence in marketing and advertising (Schimmelpfennig & Hunt, 2020), as well as theories of social learning or normative influences (Bandura, 2004; Hocevar et al., 2017). In sum, a variety of models and theoretical approaches are relevant to understanding these effects. There is some overlap among those reviewed here, but they were selected because of their relevance to explaining the role of PSEs in health outcomes.

Increasing Message Salience and Involvement

Parasocial experiences should enhance the effect of health messages by increasing attention to and processing of these messages. When people feel parasocially connected to media

figures, they enjoy encounters with them, are drawn to messages in which they appear, and are more likely to attend to the content (Hartmann, 2017). Celebrities, in particular, are automatic attention-getters, media agenda setters who generate publicity for health-related causes (Chew et al., 2019; Knoll & Matthes, 2017; Nownes, 2021). Greater visibility is one of the reasons that celebrity health events can make waves in public health trends. Both their visibility and their power to confer importance contribute to their ability to set the agenda on health issues, for the public and potentially for policymakers (Nownes, 2021). These effects should be enhanced for celebrities with whom people have PSEs (Hoffner & Park, 2021; Noar et al., 2014).

Parasocial experiences can not only increase the salience of health information, but also facilitate audience's involvement with these messages. When celebrities serve as exemplars in health coverage, their experiences should be more engaging and memorable, especially for audience members who feel parasocially engaged with them (Cohen, 2020; Yoo, 2016). Similarly, when a character in a narrative is coping with a health issue such as a cancer diagnosis, audience members are more likely to attend to and engage with the story and the embedded health message to the extent that they are emotionally attached to that character (e.g., Jensen et al., 2017; Sharf et al., 1996). Attending to and valuing messages from media figures are first steps in many health outcomes, such as modeling effects via observational learning (Bandura, 1986, 2009).

While PSEs may contribute to greater engagement with the message, they are also likely to enhance the effects of health messages through heuristic processes as well. According to the availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), information that comes to mind more easily tends to have a stronger effect on judgments about frequency or probability. So, health experiences of media figures with whom people have PSEs should be recalled more easily and thus have a stronger impact on health perceptions and judgments.

Diffusion

Exposure to media figures can also contribute to health outcomes via social diffusion processes, by motivating sharing and promotion of health behaviors to others (Bandura, 2004; Lim et al., 2020; Nabi & Prestin, 2017). Audience responses to both fictional narratives (E-E) and celebrity health events also affect interpersonal communication and sharing/dissemination of health information. In particular, PSEs with media figures not only draw attention to health issues but also motivate discussion of the health topics and sharing of health-related messages with others (Lutkenhaus et al., 2020; Myrick, 2017a; Noar et al., 2014). Because PSRs are meaningful and linked to emotion, they should increase online transmission of messages associated with media figures (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Recent studies found that PSRs with celebrities motivated health-related information sharing on social media (Cohen & Hoffner, 2016; Hoffner, 2020; Hoffner & Lane, 2021). For example, following the death of Chadwick Boseman from

colorectal cancer (CRC), both PSR with him and feelings of grief motivated sharing information about CRC on social media (Hoffner & Lane, 2021). In this way, PSEs have the potential to amplify the impact of a mediated health event by diffusion of the message to others who might otherwise not have encountered the information.

Modeling

Bandura's (1986) SCT has been applied to explain health effects of media figures (Bandura, 2004, 2009). The theory proposes that human behavior is determined by reciprocal interaction of three types of factors: person, behavior, and environment. A central element of the theory involves observational learning, or vicarious experiences through observation of models. Vicarious consequences lead to outcome expectations, including normative beliefs regarding social acceptance or social sanctions of engaging in behaviors. In this way, positive health models may inspire observers to adopt similar attitudes and behaviors, whereas models who make unhealthy choices may provide a cautionary tale, as long as negative consequences follow. Perceived self-efficacy, or the belief that one can successfully complete tasks or achieve goals, can also be influenced by vicarious experiences.

Social cognitive theory is used as the theoretical basis for explaining health effects of narratives (E-E; Wang & Singhal, 2021) and celebrities (e.g., Myrick & Erlichman, 2020). The media provide access to a wide range of people, behaviors, and situations for vicarious learning. Observation of media models may affect outcome expectations for different health behaviors, perception of health risks and benefits, self-efficacy related to health practices, and normative beliefs about various health behaviors, all of which can influence people's own health behaviors (Bandura, 2004).

Bandura (1986, 2009) argued that the influence of media models is enhanced when viewers have a stronger affective bond with those individuals. Just as people are more likely to learn from and adopt behaviors displayed by people with whom they are socially close, such as family and real-life friends (E. R. Smith & Mackie, 2016), PSRs should amplify the influence of vicarious learning from media models. One reason for this is that audiences are more likely to pay attention to the example of models with whom they have close, affective bonds. Psychological closeness to media figures can also enhance their impact on observers' sense of self-efficacy. People use close others as a touchstone to gauge their own capabilities. For instance, Tian and Yoo (2015) found that having a PSR with contestants on the weight loss reality TV show *The Biggest Loser* increased self-efficacy to exercise and led to greater intentions to engage in regular exercise as a result.

Overcoming Resistance

The EORM (Moyer-Gusé, 2008) outlines how involvement with media characters can lead to story-consistent attitudes and behaviors by affecting several mediating mechanisms, including psychological reactance and counterarguing, selective exposure, and perceptions of self-efficacy, vulnerability, social norms, and outcome expectancies. In the

EORM, Moyer-Gusé (2008) proposed that PSEs with media figures in entertainment programs should put people at ease and lower their psychological defenses against persuasive messages, reducing both psychological reactance and counterarguing to messages. Although the model was originally developed specifically to examine narrative-based health messages, it has recently been applied to explain the effect of PSRs in other persuasive contexts, such as marketing effects of social media influencers (Breves et al., 2021; see Chapter 16 in this volume). In addition, scholars have argued that PSRs with celebrities who disclose health issues can change people's appraisal of health threats, for example by increasing perceived susceptibility, thereby reducing resistance to engaging in health protection or prevention measures (e.g., Myrick, 2019; Walter et al., 2022).

Limited research has examined whether PSEs lower resistance to persuasion in health messages (Ratcliff & Sun, 2020). Two studies found that PSEs during dramatic narratives were related to lower resistance and more story-consistent attitudes or behaviors (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2012). For example, Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010) found that a stronger PSE while viewing a dramatic narrative about unplanned pregnancy was associated with lower reactance, which in turn was associated with greater safe sex intentions. But a more recent study found that PSI during a TV narrative about a sexually transmitted disease (STD) was unrelated to measures of resistance to persuasion (anger, counterarguments) and intention to be tested for an STD (Shen et al., 2017). More research is needed on the role of PSEs in reducing resistance to persuasion. But consistent with Moyer-Gusé's original suggestion, feelings of closeness with media figures should mitigate some forms of message resistance.

Social Norms

Media figures also can contribute to health outcomes by affecting perceptions of social norms regarding behaviors with health implications. Many approaches in health communication address the role of social norms, both the health impact of normative misperceptions and the use of social norms in health promotion (Reid et al., 2011; Riley et al., 2021). The two primary types of social norms are descriptive norms, or perceptions of what others commonly do or think, and injunctive norms, or perceptions of what is expected or socially approved (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Behaviors and recommendations of media figures can impact social norms (e.g., Myrick & Erlichman, 2020; K. C. Smith et al., 2009). Research has shown that exposure to social models, via incidental media exposure and health promotion, shapes normative beliefs about both negative and positive health behaviors such as smoking, drinking, hygiene practices, family planning, and eating healthy food (e.g., Hong & Kim, 2020; Mead et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2021).

Moyer-Gusé (2008) proposed that PSEs could influence health attitudes and behaviors by affecting social norm perceptions. Social norm approaches consider peers to be one of the most powerful sources of influence on people's perceptions of what health behaviors are normative and accepted (e.g., Borsari & Carey, 2003). Likewise, scholarship on social

norms has long recognized that media figures such as celebrities and fictional characters can act as behavioral models that facilitate the diffusion of different social norms (see Legros & Cislaghi, 2020). Celebrities, by virtue of their revered position in society, can have a particularly powerful influence on injunctive social norms regarding behaviors that are socially approved or encouraged (e.g., Gössling, 2019). Applied to health contexts, a celebrity who obtains a cancer screening (e.g., a colonoscopy or mammogram) may increase injunctive norms regarding that behavior and increase people's self-efficacy about obtaining that test. When a celebrity engages in a beneficial health behavior that carries stigma, such as seeking mental health treatment, this can help shift both descriptive and injunctive norms and thus increase people's willingness to perform those behaviors as well (Evans-Lacko et al., 2014). Tying these two lines of thought together, Moyer-Gusé (2008) argued that having a PSE with a media figure in a narrative could make the figure seem like part of one's social network, or a "superpeer" who offers guidance about the prevalence and acceptability of behaviors with health consequences, such as alcohol and tobacco use.

Few if any published studies have directly examined the relationship between PSE and social norms related to health. One study found that PSI with a streamer on Twitch led to greater commitment to social norms regarding behavior on the site (Wulf et al., 2021). However, one unpublished study (Cohen et al., 2022) found that the strength of a PSR with a celebrity who was shown vaping in a mock news article was *negatively* correlated with perceptions of vaping social norms. The researchers speculated this may be because a PSR with the celebrity led audience members to see them as a unique individual rather than as representative of what others typically do. Thus, the role of PSEs in social norms perceptions might depend on the type of media figure. A-list celebrities, for instance, may seem more atypical than, for instance, fictional characters that are more down to earth and relatable by design (Hinnant & Hendrickson, 2014). But even when celebrities are not seen as "typical," their exemplars are salient and memorable and may still have the potential to impact social norms, especially which behaviors are accepted or socially approved. For example, in a study that analyzed celebrity Instagram posts about COVID-19, Lookadoo et al. (2022) discussed the role of PSEs in celebrity influence and argued that seeing celebrities following recommended precautions "helped communicate positive injunctive norms related to behaviors such as masking up, staying at home, and social distancing" (p. 18).

Source Credibility

Explanations for celebrity health influence were born in marketing and psychology research on celebrity endorsements. These studies have predominantly focused on the ways that celebrities function as heuristic cues to signal message attractiveness and credibility, increase salience and memorability of messages, and convey meanings that can transfer to the product or idea being endorsed (Halder et al., 2021; Schimmelpfennig &

Hunt, 2020). These explanations overlap with classic models of source credibility, which explain how positive regard for a persuasive source (e.g., liking, familiarity, attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise) often rubs off on the messages they endorse (Knoll & Matthes, 2017).

Research shows that PSEs with celebrities are associated with greater perceived credibility (Chung & Cho, 2017; Hung et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2021), which should increase their influence on health issues. This may partially explain why the public often accepts medical advice from celebrities relatively uncritically, particularly when they have low ability or motivation to scrutinize the message (Hoffman & Tan, 2015). One experiment compared a medical doctor and a celebrity as the source in a public service announcement about skin cancer prevention and found no difference in their rated level of expertise (Woods et al., 2017). This finding suggests that celebrity spokespersons may sometimes cue the same associations of credibility as medical experts in strategic health messages. Indeed, Rasmussen and Ewoldsen (2016) found that trust dimensions of PSRs with the celebrity psychologist and talk show host Dr. Phil encouraged viewers to seek mental health treatment for themselves and their children.

Celebrities who advocate for health issues that they have personally experienced—such as Carrie Fisher or Michael J. Fox—may be regarded as more credible through what has been termed experiential credibility (Hocevar et al., 2017). However, perceptions of celebrities as health sources undoubtedly vary based on many factors, and, at least at times, their credibility will be trumped by that of medical experts. A recent study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, with over 12,000 respondents in six different countries, found that people reported a greater intention to share a Facebook message that recommended social distancing if the spokesperson was immunology expert Dr. Anthony Fauci than if the spokesperson was one of two entertainment celebrities, Tom Hanks or Kim Kardashian (Abu-Akel et al., 2021). Although PSRs were not examined, these findings suggest that Dr. Fauci conveyed greater credibility to the message than did entertainment celebrities to whom many audience members likely felt emotionally connected. Of course, part of Dr. Fauci's influence may have been due to the fact that he himself rose to the status of a celebrity who even made the cover of *People* magazine.

Health Outcomes of PSEs

A wide range of health outcomes are impacted by PSEs, and they could be organized in many ways. This section reviews research in five health areas: physical disease awareness, prevention, and treatment; mental health/mental illness; everyday health behaviors; social connection and well-being; and public health outcomes.

Physical Disease Awareness, Prevention, and Treatment

Health influences of media figures are often related to awareness, prevention, and treatment of diseases, including cancer, HIV/AIDS, and COVID-19. Media coverage of

celebrity diagnoses, health challenges, and deaths draws public attention and interest to health topics and can shape attitudes and behaviors. For example, celebrity cancer disclosures have been found to increase awareness and promote cancer screening and prevention measures (e.g., Cram et al., 2003; Kosenko et al., 2016; Myrick, 2017b; Myrick et al., 2013; Nattinger et al., 1998; Rahmani et al., 2018). Public figures often become involved in health advocacy, promoting public understanding of diseases that may have received little media attention and raising awareness among policymakers (Beck et al., 2014). For example, Magic Johnson and Charlie Sheen have both promoted HIV awareness and understanding after disclosing their own diagnoses (Brown & Basil, 1995; Francis et al., 2019).

Research has shown that PSEs with celebrities typically enhance their influence on behaviors that help maintain health, such as cancer screening, vaccination, and other health-protective behaviors (e.g., Brown & Basil, 1995; Myrick, 2019; Myrick & Willoughby, 2021; Walter et al., 2022). The Angelina effect refers to responses to Angelina Jolie's announcement that she carries the BRCA1 genetic mutation, which increased her susceptibility to breast and ovarian cancer and led to her decision to have a preventive bilateral mastectomy. Kosenko et al. (2016) found that women's PSR with Jolie was associated with greater intention to seek BRCA genetic testing, especially for those with a family history of breast cancer. The authors suggested that PSR with Jolie may have increased women's perceived vulnerability, thereby bolstering behavioral intentions to address the health threat. But there is also a potential for adverse health effects of celebrity health diagnoses if people are motivated to seek testing or treatment that may not be most appropriate for their own circumstances (Dean, 2016).

Public figures have played a substantial role in responses to the COVID-19 pandemic through media coverage of celebrity diagnoses, preventive practices (e.g., masking, vaccination), and activism (e.g., related to mandates). After actor Tom Hanks shared his diagnosis of COVID-19 on social media in March 2020, a study found that a stronger psychological relationship with him was associated with greater willingness to engage in prevention behaviors recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, mediated by perceived threat and self-efficacy (Myrick & Willoughby, 2021). Walter et al. (2022) argued that an illness experienced by a public figure with whom we have a PSR may be perceived as similar to a friend or family member having the illness. The close bond should make the illness more real and potentially threatening, thereby amplifying the sense of risk. Their findings demonstrated that PSR with a celebrity diagnosed with COVID-19 was associated with greater perceived susceptibility, which in turn was associated with higher intentions to take protective measures. However, PSRs with media figures who promote misinformation or disinformation about disease-related topics, such as in the antivaccination series *Vaccines Revealed*, may lead to attitude and behavior changes that can harm health (Bradshaw et al., 2020).

E-E efforts—both stand-alone programming and content embedded in television series and films—have sought to impact awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to health and disease prevention, focusing on topics such as HIV/AIDS, cancer, mental health, and heart disease (Sood et al., 2017). PSEs with characters in E-E programming are a key mechanism of influence (Sood et al., 2017; Sood & Rogers, 2000). When characters in ongoing series experience health issues, PSEs with those characters should increase the impact of those narratives (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). By personalizing health risks, narratives can lower individuals' perceptions of invulnerability and increase willingness to engage in self-protective behaviors. For example, in narratives depicting the risk of contracting an STD, PSE with an affected character reduced perceived social distance to the character and increased perceived self-risk (So & Shen, 2016). Greater self-risk was associated with greater acceptance of persuasive health messages.

Mental Health/Mental Illness

Mental health conditions pose an important public health challenge that is compounded by the impact of stigma (Corrigan & Kosyluk, 2014; Fuhrer & Keyes, 2019). Goffman (1963, p. 3) described stigma as a "deeply discrediting" attribute that leads to social rejection and exclusion. Stigma may be lowered by cues that suggest a health issue can be openly discussed. In recent years, numerous celebrities have disclosed mental health conditions and discussed their treatment experiences. Celebrity disclosure of any stigmatized health condition (e.g., mental illness, HIV/AIDS, cancer) has the potential to lower stigma, given that stigmatized topics have historically been kept secret (e.g., Brown & Basil, 1995; Francis et al., 2019; Hoffner & Park, 2021; Myrick, 2017b; Wong et al., 2017). For example, National Basketball Association players' mental health disclosures on Twitter stimulated fan responses that were overwhelmingly positive; commenters offered acceptance, challenged stigma, and occasionally expressed openness to seeking mental health treatment (Parrott et al., 2020). Media coverage of celebrity mental health issues can help normalize those experiences and promote open communication. Such coverage should have a greater impact for people who have a stronger PSR with the media figure (e.g., Park & Hoffner, 2020; Parrott et al., 2020; Pavelko & Myrick, 2020).

Parasocial experiences with media figures also are related to perceptions of mental health treatment and help-seeking self-efficacy and intentions. These findings have been observed for PSEs with a range of media figures, including fictional characters and celebrities dealing with mental health issues (e.g., Hoffner & Cohen, 2012, 2018; Jain et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2021) as well as celebrity therapists (Rasmussen & Ewoldsen, 2016). These effects may be due in part to shifting norms regarding mental health treatment and to the reduction in stigma related to mental health conditions (Hoffner & Cohen, 2018; Wong et al., 2017). For example, following a Bollywood celebrity's disclosure of her experience with depression, a study found that PSEs with her were associated with greater

intentions to seek mental health treatment, if needed, and this relationship was mediated by perceived self-efficacy toward seeking treatment (Jain et al., 2017).

Suicide is portrayed in news and social media coverage of the deaths of public figures and average people, popular music, and fictional offerings. These portrayals can potentially raise awareness of mental health topics and resources (e.g., Hoffner & Cohen, 2018; Kresovich, 2022). For example, following the death of Robin Williams by suicide, PSR to him and feelings of grief motivated sharing of suicide prevention information (Cohen & Hoffner, 2016; Hoffner & Cohen, 2018). But outcomes depend on the portrayals and audience responses to individuals involved. The Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* depicts the experiences of a teenage girl who dies by suicide, told from her perspective. A review of 17 studies of the series (Leaune et al., 2022) found evidence of an increase in mental health awareness but also adverse effects on mood and suicidal ideation, which the authors argued outweighed the benefits. One of these studies found that, for vulnerable adolescents (hospitalized in an inpatient psychiatric facility), connection to the character who died by suicide was one mechanism that appeared to contribute to adverse effects (Nesi et al., 2022). More research is needed on the role of different forms of character involvement in responses to the series.

Finally, a key component of mental health is the ability to cope with health challenges and other life stressors. PSRs can potentially facilitate the process of coping. People tend to regard figures with whom they have a PSR as valuable sources of guidance. Observation of social models affects outcome expectancies and perceived self-efficacy, and these effects are enhanced when people have a closer bond with the role model (Bandura, 2009). Having a PSR with a media figure who demonstrates confidence or overcomes a health challenge can provide inspiration. For example, a media figure who shares about successfully managing a mental health condition can increase people's sense of self-efficacy regarding similar circumstances (Jain et al., 2017). In a study of people who used media extensively while dealing with health challenges, including mental illness, Perks (2019, p. 313) found that "interviewees experienced 'parasocial encouragement,' drawing inspiration from characters' perseverance."

Everyday Health Behaviors

Media figures also have a substantial impact on everyday health behaviors. They can enhance physical health through effects on a range of behaviors, such as exercising, eating a healthy diet, and avoiding or reducing risky activities (e.g., smoking, drug use, unprotected sexual activity, or driving drunk). Some entertainment programs are designed to promote positive health outcomes, such as losing weight (e.g., *The Biggest Loser*) and eating healthy food (e.g., *Nutri Ventures*). Public service announcements and media campaigns address similar topics, and public figures and social media influencers actively share content intended to promote health and wellness. But the potential for beneficial or harmful outcomes depends on what behaviors are depicted, as well as the consequences shown.

When viewers form PSRs with media figures, they are more likely to accept health messages and to report healthy behavioral intentions (e.g., Sakib et al., 2020; Tian & Yoo, 2015). For example, a stronger PSR with weight loss vloggers led to greater readiness and intention to engage in recommended weight loss behaviors (Sakib et al., 2020). PSRs with spokespersons in public service announcements also boost viewers' self-efficacy and behavioral intentions regarding diet and exercise (Phua, 2016; Phua & Tinkham, 2016). A PSR or perceived friendship with social media influencers has been shown to enhance their effectiveness in promoting healthy eating, such as fruits and vegetables as snacks (e.g., Folkvord et al., 2020). Associating familiar media figures, with whom children have likely formed PSRs (e.g., Dora and Diego from *Dora the Explorer*) with healthy food products can enhance positive responses (de Droog et al., 2012).

E-E efforts have promoted safer sexual practices and safer driving behaviors, and PSEs enhance their beneficial impact. For example, research on TV narratives designed to lower teen pregnancy found that a PSR with the characters was related to greater safe sex intentions, mediated by attitude change or reduced counterarguing (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2019; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). In another study, a PSR with the protagonist in a TV episode about drinking and driving was related to lower perceived persuasive intent, leading to more story-consistent attitudes about drunk driving (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2012).

But media figures may also have negative consequences for everyday health behaviors. Risky or dangerous behaviors, such as smoking, drug use, unprotected sex, and dangerous driving, are a common feature of entertainment media, reality TV programming, and news coverage of public figures (e.g., Bleakley et al., 2014; Kinsler et al., 2019; K. C. Smith et al., 2009; Tien et al., 2018). PSRs with media figures who engage in risky behavior may increase the perceived acceptability of those behaviors or even inspire similar behaviors. For example, media figures who engage in vaping or illegal drug use sanction or encourage those activities among viewers, especially those who feel stronger PSRs with the figures (Daniel et al., 2018; Fogel & Shlivko, 2016). PSEs with media figures also can lead to unhealthy outcomes related to diet and eating behaviors. For example, Myrick (2020) found that a PSR with President Trump was associated with greater perceived acceptability of fast food. Similarly, children's bonding or connection with vloggers led to increased memory for brands and products promoted on the vlog, which were mostly snack foods (candy, energy drinks) and fast food (Folkvord et al., 2019). PSRs with celebrities who conveyed diet misinformation—about the health benefits of a master cleanse—led to more favorable outcome expectation and greater intentions to try the cleanse (Myrick & Erlichman, 2020). Although social comparisons to media figures can be inspirational, unrealistic body images and fitspiration messages may lead viewers—especially those with stronger PSRs—to make negative social comparisons, potentially contributing to lower body satisfaction and eating disorders (e.g., Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013; Jin, 2018; see also a review of research on PSR and body image in Chapter 11 in this volume).

Social Connection and Well-Being

Promoting social connection has been considered a public health priority because feeling socially connected is associated with lower levels of disease and mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017). The current media environment has substantially widened our social circle, offering contact with a greater range of media figures than ever before (Bond, 2022; Hoffner & Bond, 2022). PSEs with media figures can increase people's experience of social connection and sense of community (Blight et al., 2017; Hsu, 2020; Iannone et al., 2018; see Chapter 10 and Chapter 11 in this volume). Even thinking about a PSR can lead to a sense of belonging and buffer against negative emotions (Derrick et al., 2009). Thus, by contributing to a sense of social connection, PSEs can have mental health benefits and may bolster positive outcomes in other health domains (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017).

Public Health Outcomes

The research on PSEs and health reviewed so far mostly addressed individual-level effects on personal health and well-being. Many of these health outcomes for individuals have implications for public health, which focuses on promoting health and preventing disease in communities and populations. PSEs should also contribute to public health goals, such as encouraging blood and organ donations (Bae et al., 2011), increasing funding for health-related programs and research (Hoffner, 2020), and promoting public health policies. Media figures can serve as role models for actions that promote public health and can also shift social norms regarding behaviors that promote public health, such as seeking mental health treatment (Parrott et al., 2020).

Media coverage of celebrity health events and the sharing of health messages can increase public awareness and potentially impact public health (Lutkenhaus et al., 2020; Noar et al., 2014). In 1991, Magic Johnson's disclosure that he was HIV+ was a turning point in widespread awareness of the disease, and a PSR with Johnson increased the impact of his announcement (Brown & Basil, 1995). A survey in South Korea following the death of Cardinal Stephen Sou-hwan Kim found that PSI with Cardinal Kim was associated with intention to donate corneas and to volunteer time to community service, causes that he had promoted (Bae et al., 2011). PSRs with media figures connected to health issues, such as cancer and mental health, can increase the motivation to share messages about those issues (e.g., Cohen & Hoffner, 2016; Hoffner, 2020; Hoffner & Lane, 2021). But in addition to reaching other users, sharing on digital platforms has the potential to increase the visibility of health issues, promoting funding support and potentially impacting public policy.

Health topics in entertainment similarly can impact public awareness directly and also boost conversations and message sharing. Many of the health topics in E-E efforts have been intended to address public health issues such as HIV/AIDS education and sexual health, and PSEs with media characters play a central role in this process (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Sood et al., 2017). In the current media environment, spreadable E-E is a

way to reach audiences with important public health messages. Spreadable messages have been leveraged by health organizations to promote public awareness and raise money. The ALS ice bucket challenge was uniquely successful in reaching a wide audience and raising funds for research on amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) (Lutkenhaus et al., 2020). The social media challenge featured short videos of celebrities like Bill Gates taking the challenge to have a bucket of ice water poured over their head, followed by a request for contributions to the ALS Foundation. The videos spread rapidly and widely on social media, resulting in $115 million in donations. Although not examined in research, it makes sense that PSEs with celebrities who took up the challenge promoted sharing of the videos (cf. Cohen & Hoffner, 2016). Spreadable E-E is also exemplified in transmedia storytelling, in which narratives and media characters are featured across multiple digital platforms and are widely shared. Transmedia storytelling, such as the drama *East Los High*, can reach a wider audience, promote audience engagement, and facilitate health access via links to public health services related to the story content (Lutkenhaus et al., 2020; Wang & Singhal, 2016).

Health campaigns to promote public health outcomes, such as increasing cancer screening or promoting mask wearing or vaccination during the COVID-19 pandemic, often involve well-known spokespersons. Although the role of PSEs in these types of campaigns has not received much research, it makes sense that one factor in campaign effectiveness is audience involvement with the media figures (Evans-Lacko et al., 2014; Jiang et al., 2022; Manganello et al., 2020). But PSEs involving average people affected by health issues also may promote awareness and funding support. This seems to be the idea behind sharing personal stories of individuals affected by illness (e.g., Breves, 2020; Ferrari et al., 2022). In one study, experiencing a health documentary via immersive video promoted "empathic PSI" with an individual in a refugee camp at risk of malaria, which in turn increased issue involvement and interest in the campaign to prevent the disease from spreading (Breves, 2020). These findings suggest that promoting empathy via PSI with individuals affected by health issues may be a way to promote interest and financial support.

Conclusions and Future Research

As this review demonstrated, there is substantial research documenting links between PSEs with fictional characters, celebrities, and other media figures and audiences' health-related perceptions and behavior. Collectively, work in the realms of E-E, media figure health events, and strategic health messaging indicates that media figures can have profound impacts on public health, affecting a range of outcomes from disease awareness, attitudes toward mental illness, health information sharing, treatment seeking, and everyday health behaviors. PSEs can enhance all of these effects. In other words, a sense of social connection to media figures amplifies their influence.

Yet, despite the wealth of information the studies reviewed in this chapter provide about the role of PSE in health outcomes, there are still several open questions and

limitations with this research that stand to be addressed. This section offers suggestions on how future work in this area can refine our understanding of the processes that underlie the role of PSEs in public health outcomes by distinguishing between PSEs and other types of media figure involvement and between different types of PSEs; by identifying the conditions for these processes; and by further considering the unique features of our digital environment (e.g., social media, transmedia experiences).

Identifying the Unique Role of PSEs in Media Figure Health Influence

Although the scope of this chapter is more or less limited to theory and research on PSEs and health, it should be clear that PSEs are but one category of media figure involvement that can contribute to the health-related effects of media figures. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, in addition to PSEs, several other types of media figure involvement, such as liking/affinity, perceived similarity, identification, and wishful identification have been implicated in the processes through which media figures wield influence on their audiences' health-related decision-making. Because all of these types of involvement are related, this complicates our understanding of the unique role that PSEs play in health-related influence. In the interest of theoretical refinement, future research should seek to untangle PSEs from these other related forms of involvement in order to better understand the unique mechanisms through which PSEs exert influence.

A PSR is essentially a feeling of intimacy and closeness with a media figure (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Although PSRs should be associated with other types of involvement, closeness should explain much of why people who develop PSRs with celebrities or fictional characters are more affected by their health-related experiences and endorsements. In interpersonal relationships, the closer two people are, the more likely they are to be co-oriented, sharing perspectives and seeing the world similarly. People tend to expect that close others share their orientation to the world, and they weigh close others' perspectives more heavily when making decisions (Aron et al., 1991; E. R. Smith & Mackie, 2016). For these reasons, PSRs, like social relationships, should be expected to exert a relatively powerful influence on audiences' health and wellness. Furthermore, this path of influence in health contexts should be unique from other forms of involvement that do not include a sense of psychological closeness. Yet the research reviewed in this chapter has often conflated different types of involvement. Part of this obfuscation stems from measurement issues. For instance, not only is liking typically correlated with PSR, but also measures of PSR typically tap into feelings of affinity as well as closeness (Cohen, Myrick, & Hoffner, 2021). This conceptual overlap makes it difficult to tease apart how much media figure health influence can be attributed to a genuine PSR rather than mere liking effects. Moving forward, research on media figure involvement and health outcomes should consider comparative effects of different types of involvement. Scholars should also ensure that the scales they employ to measure different types of involvement appropriately discriminate between concepts.

Examining Health Outcomes of Different Types of PSEs

Relatedly, not all PSEs are alike (Dibble et al., 2016; Stever, 2017). Consistent with Horton and Wohl's (1956) initial observations, until relatively recently, research on PSEs (including health outcomes of these experiences) did not draw a clear distinction between PSIs (a sense of mutual awareness during media exposure; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011) and PSRs (a sense of close personal connection to a media figure that can persist after media exposure). Both of these experiences should enhance a media figure's influence on health-related outcomes, but for different reasons. As discussed above, feelings of closeness should lead audiences to exhibit greater perceptional and behavioral conformity with a media figure. In the case of PSIs, however, the mechanism of influence should be related to qualities of the illusionary interaction—whether, for instance, a media persona exhibiting or endorsing a health-related idea seems sincere, authentic, or caring *in the moment* of media exposure (Cohen & Tyler, 2016; Dai & Walther, 2018). Given increasing public reliance on media figures such as social media influencers that employ both live-streaming and prerecorded videos for health information, better understanding of how PSIs with these broadcasters affect audience responses to their health messages is a fruitful area for future research.

In addition, PSEs with disliked media characters need further exploration in the context of health outcomes (see Chapter 17 in this volume on ambivalent and negative PSRs). PSRs, in particular, are usually assumed to be laden with positive affect, and this is reflected in the measures. But scholars have recognized that people can have close bonds with disliked media figures in the same way they have relationships with people whom they dislike, such as a boss or family member (e.g., Cohen, Myrick, & Hoffner, 2021; Dibble & Rosaen, 2011; Myrick, 2020). Moreover, adopting a critical orientation to media content, such as "hate-watching," may alter the persuasive influence of health-related messages conveyed by media figures (Cohen, Knight, et al., 2021).

Identifying the Conditional Effects of PSEs on Health

Collectively, the body of research synthesized in this chapter provides compelling evidence that audience members' PSEs can have a considerable impact on their health and well-being, and that these effects are fairly consistent. Yet, the conditions in which these effects occur have not been established or mapped extensively. For instance, this chapter reviewed several reasons that people's PSRs should shape their perceptions of social norms, but there are still many open questions about the circumstances under which this influence might occur. If the intensity of PSRs increases the salience of media figures as referents for social norms, what social group do these media figures serve as a referent for? Or do they reflect societal norms more broadly? And, how does the type of media figure (e.g., reality TV star, movie actor, fictional superhero, or political pundit) that PSRs are formed with affect their normative influence? Likewise, even the link between PSRs and self-efficacy to perform behaviors has not been explored thoroughly. It makes sense that closeness to

an overweight reality show contestant should enhance audience members' self-efficacy to model health-related behavior such as exercise (e.g., Tian & Yoo, 2015). But we suspect that these findings would not generalize to all health behaviors and all media figures. For instance, most people probably would not feel as efficacious to engage in gymnastics, even if they had developed a PSR with an Olympic gymnast. There are likely moderators of the link between PSR intensity and self-efficacy that can attenuate or amplify these effects, such as perceived similarity to the media figure (see Chapter 11 in this volume on assimilation and contrast processes in PSRs). These are but a few examples of established theoretical processes that underlie the influence of PSEs on health outcomes that likely consist of more nuance than existing research has identified. A goal of future research should be to further explicate and strengthen the link between existing theory on health-related effects and PSEs by more thoroughly explaining the conditions for these processes.

Expanding Work That Explores the Unique Features of Our Current Digital Environment

Technologies such as social media, mHealth (mobile health) apps, video streaming, and transmedia storytelling have changed the way that people connect with and respond to media figures. To extend our understanding of how PSEs influence health outcomes, research must further explore the opportunities and challenges of our current digital environment. Social media platforms have altered the nature and availability of PSEs as well as the ways that health messages can be received, responded to, and shared (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). The rise of social media influencers and celebrities' extensive use of platforms such as Twitter and Instagram have exponentially increased access to messages with health implications, delivered by media figures (e.g., Daniel et al., 2018; Folkvord et al., 2020; Lookadoo et al., 2022; Parrott et al., 2020). The reach and impact of spreadable media, such as the ALS ice bucket challenge, open new possibilities for health communication. Together, these developments have increased opportunities for reaching people with beneficial health messages, but the potential for misinformation—sometimes shared by charismatic public figures—has also increased (Borah et al., 2022; Myrick & Erlichman, 2020). Online health tools and mHealth apps, featuring virtual agents, are increasingly used to provide health information and advice, and PSRs can form with these virtual agents (Cao et al., 2022). With the rise of video streaming services, binge watching has become easier and more common. A recent survey found that binge watching was associated with greater perceived transportation and stronger PSRs, which potentially may alter the effects of health-related narratives (Anghelcev et al., 2021). These are just some of the digital contexts in which the role of PSEs in health outcomes needs to be further explored.

Finally, a holistic understanding of how PSEs shape health outcomes requires the examination of transmedia health messages. As recent work on several E-E initiatives has recognized (see Wang & Singhal, 2021), audiences frequently consume stories and develop PSRs across multiple media platforms (e.g., on TV or streaming, in fan fiction,

and in Facebook groups about a show). For instance, a media user may watch a reality TV cast member's struggle with a health crisis on the TV show and then seek more information on the cast member's blog or participate in discussions on social media. These multiple-platform experiences likely enhance both PSRs *and* exposure to health-related information, thereby strengthening the health influence of PSRs. But to our knowledge, this has not been investigated yet. To elucidate the effects of transmedia PSEs on health, future research should make an effort to consider and map PSEs as experiences that unfold for audiences across different mediated spaces.

Note

1. There are two primary types of parasocial experiences: parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships (Dibble et al., 2016). Parasocial interaction (PSI) refers to an audience members' sense that during media exposure, a media persona is communicating directly to them (see Chapter 3 in this volume). A parasocial relationship (PSR) is a sense of personal connection that audience members develop with a persona that they come to feel they know through the media (e.g., a talk show host, professional athlete, fictional television character, or politician), even though they have likely never had two-way communication with them (see Chapter 2 in this volume). Although there is ample evidence for the distinction between PSI and PSR, in practice, studies have often used measures that make it difficult to distinguish which was assessed (see Chapter 4 in this volume). However, often it is clear that studies assessed what could be termed a PSR, or a sense of enduring connection with a media figure. Thus, except in rare cases when the distinction is relevant, this chapter will refer to PSRs or PSEs.

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CHAPTER

15 Parasocial Experiences in the Political Arena

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Abstract

As politics becomes increasingly personalized, research in parasocial relationships (PSRs) has begun to explore the effects of the public's imagined relationships with political figures. This chapter provides an overview of this emerging area of study, beginning with a discussion of three primary strands of research on politically relevant PSRs. The first focuses on PSRs with politicians (e.g., Donald Trump) and examines how media and social media foster these parasocial experiences. The second looks at PSRs with media personae, including newscasters, pundits, and celebrities, who may shape audiences' political perceptions and engagement. The third line of research turns to PSRs with characters in political TV shows (e.g., *The West Wing*), exploring how fictional politicians can have real-world influence. The chapter then discusses overlaps and distinctions between PSRs and other related predictors of political support, as well as current methods utilized to measure PSRs with politicians, and concludes with some recommendations for the future of study and theorization of the political impact of PSRs.

Key Words: Celebrity politics, political participation, social media, Donald Trump, measurement validity

Introduction

> Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.
>
> —*Shakespeare, 1599*

> Obama is more like your best friend who has parties—and has Beyoncé over.
>
> —*Michigan voter, 2017*

The quotes above span centuries and continents. The first is famously uttered in William Shakespeare's retelling of the Roman civil war, as Mark Antony rouses public hostility against the conspirators who murdered Julius Caesar (Shakespeare, 1599/2001, 3.2.121). The second, more than 400 years later, was shared by a Michigan voter and Barack Obama supporter in the run-up to the 2016 U.S. presidential elections (Blake, 2017). As different as these quotes may seem at first glance, at their core, both share a fundamental

understanding of the relationship between political leaders and their followers. In contrast to a conventionally transactional view of politics, wherein voters trade political support in the hope that their chosen representative will advance their interests when in power, the relationship reflected here is one fundamentally based in trust, perceived intimacy, and loyalty. In this sense, both cases highlight the key role that social and parasocial bonds play in politics.

As these examples suggest, the importance of personalized relationships between leaders and followers can be traced back to the earliest civilizations (Caughey, 1984). Yet, these kinds of relations are arguably more powerful and important than ever before. Whether one celebrates or laments the shift toward personalized politics, it is hard to dispute that more and more media coverage and popular discourse focuses on politicians' personal lives over substantive political issues (Hart, 1999; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; McGregor, 2018). And as politics has become more personalized, it has cleared the path to the upper echelons of power for charismatic personalities who in the past may have struggled to advance because they were deemed too politically risky or lacked relevant qualifications (e.g., Moy et al., 2006). Donald Trump is by far the most famous, but there's no shortage of other notable examples, among them Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy and former Guatemalan president Jimmy Morales, both actors and comedians in their previous lives; Imran Kahn, an international cricket star before becoming prime minister of Pakistan; and Yair Lapid, a one-time talk show host turned major political leader in Israel. Of course, there are plenty more examples of failed celebrity bids for political office as well, but this blurred line between celebrity and politician has become an embedded feature of modern politics. Indeed, in post-Trump America, voters appear to be increasingly in favor of celebrity politicians: In recent polls, up to 58% of voters wanted to see actors Matthew McConaughey and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson launch bids for the Texas governorship and U.S. presidency, respectively (Samuels, 2021). At the same time, politicians are reaching celebrity status in their own right, gaining not only voters, but also "fans" as they tap into Hollywood-style playbooks and networks (Wright, 2020).

The movement away from traditional evaluations of candidates along party lines (Bartels, 2000; Schartel Dunn & Nisbett, 2014) also coincides with the growing importance and popularity of social media platforms as legitimate arenas for political discourse (Davis & Taras, 2020; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Social media has opened new, more direct channels of communication between politician and public. It is no coincidence that the list of the top 10 most followed Twitter accounts in 2022 included two politicians—President Barack Obama and Narendra Modi, the prime minister of India. (Notably, President Trump's Twitter account had also been high on this list before he was suspended from the platform in 2021 for inciting violence.) The affordances of social media make political discourse feel less filtered and more spontaneous and authentic, accentuating a sense of personal connection (Manning et al. 2017; Marshall, 2020). With a direct line of

communication to their followers, modern politicians are free to select which aspects of their public personae to highlight, be it the loving parent or dedicated spouse, the social justice warrior, fashion icon, or dog lover. In this reality, voters' support is not a simple calculation of whose policies best reflect their interests, it is also weighted heavily toward candidates whose personalities they like, those with whom they connect emotionally—or at least, to cite the well-worn maxim, someone you can imagine sitting down for a beer with (Lee et al., 2018). It has often been said that politics is personal; now, more than ever, it is not only personal, it is also (para)relational.

In this context, the notion that individuals can foster meaningful relationships with media personae, whom they are unlikely to meet in person but still treat as familiar others (Dibble & Rosaen, 2011), appears particularly germane. The framework of parasocial relationships (PSRs) as imagined, long-term, emotional bonds individuals establish with media personae (Horton & Wohl, 1956; R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987) is thus particularly well suited to modern politics in the era of social media.

With this in mind, the bulk of this chapter focuses on empirical research on politically relevant PSRs with (a) celebrities, (b) fictional characters, and (c) politicians. The discussion of empirical findings highlights both the opportunities and the limitations of extant research into parasocial experiences in the political domain. The chapter then turns to a discussion of the overlaps between PSRs and other related predictors of political support, as well as current methods utilized to measure PSRs with politicians. We conclude with some recommendations for the future study and theorization of the impact of parasocial experience on political participation.

Research Into PSRs in Politics

The experience and subsequent effects of PSRs have been extensively studied in the contexts of entertainment, health (see Chapter 14), and marketing (see Chapter 16). The political implications of this imagined give and take, however, have received little empirical attention, and it was not until recently that scholars began to more deliberately examine effects and implications of PSRs in political contexts. The research thus far broadly focuses on three types of relationships: those with media personae and celebrities, those with fictional political characters, and those with real-world politicians.

PSRs With Celebrities

As the world of entertainment merges into the political realm, research has followed suit, extending its established focus on PSRs with celebrities and media personae to those with political presence and influence. While not explicitly or primarily in the political realm themselves, such celebrated figures nevertheless play a prominent role in informing the public about social and political issues. It is little surprise, then, that trying to capture the impact of celebrity–audience relationships on political behavior has been a long-standing goal of researchers and political actors alike. In fact, there is a strong case to be made that

the very idea of PSRs and parasocial interactions (PSIs) originated with the case of a popular celebrity who had enormous success advocating for a political cause.

When the United States became involved in World War II, its leaders had to figure out how to finance military operations and control inflation in a stimulated wartime economy. Their solution was to sell war bonds directly to the public as debt securities, often using appeals to patriotism and civic responsibility to try to win people over. From a traditional persuasion perspective, it makes sense that politicians, generals, or even soldiers would be best suited to lead this effort. In reality, however, the biggest seller of war bonds was Kate Smith, a popular singer and radio personality, with no experience in war, bonds, or politics. During a single 18-hour radio marathon, Smith brought in over $39 million in pledged war bonds from listeners (McGranahan, 1947; Merton, 1946). Smith's lack of political experience may well have played to her advantage: Unlike politicians or generals who might come across as distant, stoic, or in pursuit of a hidden agenda, Smith appealed to the public as a personal friend asking for help (Brown, 2015; Sood & Rogers, 2000). A decade later, attempting to explain Smith's extraordinary success, Horton and his colleagues developed the concept of PSI as an imaginary interaction between listeners and media personae (Horton & Strauss, 1957; Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Since then, researchers have continued trying to unpack the political potential of parasocial bonds with public personae who serve as mediators of political content. Among the most obvious contenders in this role are newscasters and pundits. The conventions and structure of news and commentary shows certainly help to engender a sense of familiarity and social closeness: These are figures who regularly appear on air, looking straight into the camera, and speaking directly to the audience at home. As such, some of the earliest research into PSRs examined newscasters as trusted curators of political information. For instance, Levy (1979) provided the first indication that PSRs with favorite newscasters can translate into political views. According to Levy, when forming political beliefs, individuals tend to compare and adjust their ideas in line with the presumed views of their favorite newscasters. Given that newscasters are conventionally portrayed as neutral conduits for political information, this finding is particularly striking with regard to the potency of PSR—and perhaps the state of news media more broadly.

If the political influence of newscasters emerges between the lines of their professional conventions, in which their own views are not overtly expressed, political pundits are not so constrained. Indeed, pundits are often hired specifically to amplify their particular audience's views and explicitly align themselves with certain political perspectives. This makes them a potent vessel for PSR-based political influence. Schartel Dunn (2018) found that well-liked commentators, perceived by viewers as friends, were able to increase the salience of political information by encouraging the audience to think more carefully about those issues. This finding is especially notable since all four political commentators referenced in the study (Jeanine Pirro, Bill O'Reilly, Rachel Maddow, and Lawrence O'Donnell) were known for being politically partisan and somewhat divisive.

No other news medium has drawn more attention in this arena than talk radio. Research has found that parasocial connection with political talk radio hosts predicts not only intentional and frequent listening, but also acting on a host's advice with regard to specific societal concerns (A. M. Rubin & Step, 2000). This outsized influence of talk radio commentators might be explained by the unique draw of partisan content, as serving both informational and relational functions: For more active listeners, political talk radio seems to satisfy a mix of needs, including seeking political information, interpreting reality, and providing companionship through PSRs (Hofstetter & Gianos, 1997).

Of course, politics spills out well beyond the newsroom, and as the traditional boundaries between hard news and entertainment blur, celebrities and media personae can become prominent voices raising awareness around political issues. From Colin Kaepernick, the former National Football League quarterback who protested policy brutality and racial inequality by kneeling during the national anthem at the start of games (Coombs et al., 2020), to Princess Diana's advocacy for land mine removal (Brockington, 2014), and human rights initiatives advanced by actress Emma Watson (Haastrup, 2018), media personae garner attention and support for a wide array of political causes and increasing political engagement overall. For example, among students in Macau, PSRs and identification with celebrities known for political or civic advocacy predicted greater political efficacy, which in turn led to more engagement and actions such as signing a petition or making charitable donations (Wen & Cui, 2014). Similarly, PSRs with the politically vocal singer Taylor Swift increased political participation and voting intention: In a 2021 study, Nisbett and Schartle Dunn found that Swift's political messages were more persuasive among fans who were engaged in Swift's personal narrative and thought of her as a friend.

The ability of celebrity PSRs to move the needle on controversial issues has been observed across the political ideological spectrum. For example, following Pope John Paul II's death, research showed that PSR with the former pope was strongly associated with adoption of his conservative positions on moral issues (Brown, 2009). Steve Irwin, a popular TV personality in Australia and around the globe, won over audiences with his energy and passion to become the world's most recognizable and beloved advocate for wildlife conservation. As revealed in a survey following his sudden death, PSR with Irwin was a predictor of support for wildlife conservation, regardless of people's political ideology (Brown, 2010). Irwin's impact in this regard is all the more notable because views on conservation are notoriously politicized (Ditmer et al., 2022).

This is by no means to say that responses to celebrity involvement in political causes is universally positive. Far from it—as activist athletes told to "shut up and dribble" can attest—celebrities can face intense backlash among audiences who reject their political views as illegitimate (Duvall, 2020; Galily, 2019). What's more, even the closest friends experience tensions and falling out. So what happens when a person finds themselves at odds with a beloved celebrity advocating for a political cause they disagree with? Do

people lose PSR friendships over celebrity politics, or are politics left at the door when it comes to mediated friends? This precise question was at the heart of a 2022 experiment that exposed participants to an altered Twitter feed of three popular actors (Jack Black, Dwayne Johnson, and Ryan Gosling), which portrayed them as adopting either liberal or conservative stances on two highly politicized issues—gun control and immigration (Tukachinsky Forster & Downey, 2022). When media users disagreed with the statements, they were also personally put off by the celebrity, experiencing a weaker PSR. However, viewers who already liked the celebrity prior to the study were more likely to separate the actor from their politics, finding a path to continue enjoying their work while still disagreeing with them. This may sound familiar: This type of decoupling—by which we play down negative aspects of someone's personality or behavior in order to maintain a positive perception and relationship with them—is a very common strategy in sustaining real-life friendships. Contrasting with popular calls to keep politics and entertainment separate, the data suggest that even beyond celebrities' ability to increase political engagement more broadly (Nisbett & Schartel Dunn, 2021), there could be value in such an alliance if PSRs can bridge divides and make people even slightly more sympathetic to those who do not share their ideologies.

The picture is not an uncomplicated one, however, and there is also evidence that celebrity PSRs can push people in the opposite direction. Indeed, one of the major critiques leveled against the culture of celebrity politics is that it encourages superficial political engagement, based more on instinctive, personalized feelings than on informed civic deliberation (Lee & Shin, 2012). It's no coincidence that Jamieson and Cappella's (2008) searching analysis into the causes of political polarization in the United States identified political talk radio as the key suspect. Likewise, Tukachinsky Forster and Downey (2022) found that fans may be willing to sacrifice some political engagement in order to preserve their attachment to a favorite celebrity: Faced with the dissonance of their idol expressing political values counter to their own, fans often choose to downplay the importance of the issue rather than damage their positive perception and relationship with the celebrity.

PSRs With Fictional Political Characters

Where a PSR with celebrities offers the opportunity to explore the political influence of nonpoliticians, an interesting twist on that strand of research examines how involvement with fictional politicians can have real-world consequences. To a degree, this line of research is based in theories of entertainment–education and narrative persuasion (Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008), which show that involvement with the story and its characters provides avenues to reduce resistance to persuasion (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). That is to say, audience members are more likely to be receptive to information that might otherwise raise defensive hackles when the message is embedded within an engrossing story with compelling characters. Thus far, these effects have been primarily studied in the context of health, science, and marketing, but it stands to reason that

involvement with political characters can likewise provide a rich context for political persuasion and influence.

Perhaps the most iconic fictional depictions of politics and politicians is the critically acclaimed TV series, *The West Wing*, which aired from 1999 to 2006. For seven seasons, the Emmy Award–winning NBC drama depicted the daily life and pressures of a fictional president of the United States, Josiah Bartlet. The show purposefully focused on the personal character of the commander-in-chief, who is depicted as intelligent, funny, charismatic, heroic, and someone who embodies the core values that Americans hold most dear in their elected officials (Holbert et al., 2005). As a result of this portrayal, fans of the show seemed to adopt a more positive perception of the real-world U.S. presidency, as well as a more favorable view of the leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties at the time (Holbert et al., 2003). Although empirical research has not examined PSR with President Bartlet specifically, it is tempting to speculate that at least some of these effects can be explained by the viewers' personal connection with this beloved character.

Nearly a decade after President Bartlet's fictional term came to an end on *The West Wing*, American viewers were introduced to a strikingly different on-screen representation of a U.S. president: Frank Underwood, the lead character of the hit Netflix show *House of Cards*. A far cry from Barlet's patriotic ideals, Underwood was an immoral politician, driven by a thirst for personal power and revenge. If President Bartlet's presidency depicted an optimistic vision in which governmental institutions work earnestly to improve the life of citizens, President Underwood's was a Machiavellian view of government fallibility and corruption. On its face, this would seem to make Frank Underwood an unlikely candidate for a parasocial connection with viewers. Yet, as Oliver et al. (2019) demonstrated, the stylistic choice to have Underwood repeatedly break the fourth wall and speak directly to the audience seemed to evoke feelings of perceived interaction and complicity among viewers. It is worth noting that the study focused on PSI and did not directly measure PSR, but the findings nevertheless suggest that political dramas can encourage affinity between viewers and fictional politicians, even if they are presented as immoral or socially undesirable.

Josiah Bartlet may have been a too-good-to-be-true, and Frank Underwood a too-evil-to-be-true, caricature of a president. Both characters, however, were very traditional in one respect: namely, both were played by older White male actors, portraying roles that have been most commonly occupied by older White males in real life. As such, it was not clear how viewers would respond to more diverse portrayals of political power. A survey study by Hoewe and Sherrill (2019) found that regular viewers of *Madam Secretary*, *The Good Wife*, and *Scandal*—all political dramas featuring female leads—reported on PSR with the main characters, which was also associated with political interest, self-efficacy, and real-world political participation in the form of attending political events, circulating petitions, and contacting a public official. Intriguingly, the data also suggested that men were more likely to watch *Madam Secretary*, whereas women were more likely to follow *Scandal*. Regardless of these differences, however, the association between PSR,

political, interest, self-efficacy, and real-world political participation held true for both women and men.

PSR With Real Politicians

Stepping more fully into the real world, the third area of research into PSR and politics concerns the relationships that voters establish with politicians and the subsequent impact that such bonds have on political support. As the boundaries between the public and the private spheres blur, it is not surprising that PSRs are likely a key factor in the popularity and even electability of public servants.

In part, the surge in interest around the role played by PSR in electing politicians was spurred ahead by the norms-obliterating candidacy and subsequent presidency of Donald Trump, who provided researchers with a fascinating case for study. From his earliest days as a candidate, the brash businessman turned reality TV star overwhelmed the news cycle, reshaping the presidency to center on himself. Jumping from scandal to scandal, he successfully cultivated an energized base of core supporters who remained loyal to him through unprecedented turmoil, including a documented 30,573 false or misleading claims (Kessler et al., 2021), two impeachments, and one insurrection. The so-called Twitter president embraced social media, primarily Twitter, to routinely speak directly to his 88 million followers with a daily dose of commentary, insults, boasts, directives, more insults, and threats (Ingram, 2017). This unfiltered and unprecedented insight into the president's inner world was fertile ground for PSR. Indeed, across an experiment and two correlational studies, Paravati et al. (2020) showed that people who were exposed to Trump's Twitter feed experienced greater PSR with him, which in turn increased his likability among those who shared his views. As the authors concluded: "When people with a political ideology similar to Trump's read his Twitter feed, they felt like they knew him personally, which predicted them liking him even more" (Paravati et al., 2020, p. 388).

Such findings urge a closer look at the role played by media in fostering parasocial attachment with politicians. The idea that politicians must be viewed by their constituents as relatable in order to be elected—and that media are a powerful avenue to achieve this—is hardly new. Consider the following story about Warren G. Harding, an Ohio Republican. Harding was a successful businessman, tall and handsome, with a traditional presidential look. He had one considerable image problem, however: He was widely perceived as a snob. In particular, his taste for golf, a sport that was viewed as elitist, was thought to be a major political liability among the crucial bloc of blue-collar voters. And so, prior to the 1920 presidential elections, the avid golfer transformed into a die-hard baseball fan. Harding and his team of savvy advisors used the press to their advantage in selling the presidential hopeful's new common-man persona. More than 80 years before the advent of social media, they staged their own version of a viral event: In a moment immortalized in a now-famous photograph, the future 29th president threw out the first

three pitches of a game between the Chicago Cubs and a semiprofessional team from his hometown and claimed his "popular sporting bona fides" (Morello, 2001, p. 58). Harding went on to win the presidency with an unprecedented 60% of the popular vote.

The empirical impact of Harding's transformation was not captured in real time, but researchers have repeatedly shown that the kind of personalized appeals used in his campaign can effectively encourage PSRs and generate political support in modern contexts. For instance, one online experiment exposed U.S. adults to either personalized or policy tweets from a male or a female U.S. senator running for reelection (McGregor, 2018). The results demonstrated that tweets highlighting the personal life of the political figure generated greater perception of a PSI with the candidate. This particular experiment was not a longitudinal study, which would have allowed for the testing of longer term effects, but scholars have argued that extended exposure to politicians and repeated PSIs encourage individuals to think of political figures as friends (Semmler, 2007). In that case, it seems reasonable that media personae who have been in the public eye for a long time have an inherent advantage when entering the political arena. Here again, one of the most obvious examples is Donald Trump, who headlined the popular TV reality show *The Apprentice* as a ruthless businessman for 15 seasons before entering politics. Keeping in mind that the outcome of the 2016 U.S. elections defied most predictions, researchers tried to understand whether Trump's successful campaign had anything to do with PSRs and his prior life as a TV star. The results of a survey suggested that exposure to Trump through *The Apprentice*, among his many other media appearances, predicted the formation of a PSR among his supporters. This perceived bond also predicted belief in Trump's campaign promises, as well as a tendency toward "disregarding his unpopular statements, and having generally more positive evaluations of him" (Gabriel et al., 2018, p. 299). Strikingly, the effect was even more pronounced among people who had strong PSR with Trump but held opposing political views. In short—excusing the inevitable pun—PSR "trumped" ideology.

Others have extended this line of inquiry by attempting to assess the predictive value of PSR on political support for a candidate or elected official (Cohen & Holbert, 2021). Focusing yet again on President Trump along with two of his notable counterparts, Secretary Hillary Clinton and U.S. Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, Cohen and Holbert (2021) used a panel of U.S. adults to understand whether political PSR could predict support. The statistical model was able to account for an astonishing 82% of the variance in support for President Trump. Even more remarkable, PSR with the president was by far the strongest predictor of support, even when accounting for sociodemographics and political variables such as having confidence in Trump, supporting his policies, or even being affiliated with the Republican Party. PSRs with Speaker Ryan and Secretary Clinton also proved to be significant predictors of their support—particularly notable as neither candidate had celebrity status prior to their involvement in politics as Trump did. It appears, then, that the power of PSR with politicians is not reserved for unconventional

and media savvy figures such as President Trump, but can be extended to more traditional politicians as well.

These studies provide fascinating insight, but they leave open the question of whether the predictive power of PSRs with politicians can reach beyond likability and support to actual voting behavior. Moreover, it is important to assess whether the role played by PSR in politics is unique to the more heavily researched U.S. context or whether it can be generalized to other political systems. This area of study has yet to accumulate a large body of empirical evidence, but Israel's multiparty parliamentary democracy has provided an especially interesting research site in this vein, particularly because Benjamin Netanyahu held the office of prime minister for a record 15 years (from 1996 to 1999, and again from 2009 to 2021). Netanyahu's extraordinary run has been attributed by some commentators to the unique bond he was able to forge with his voters (Samuel-Azran & Yarchi, 2020; Sorek & Ceobanu, 2021). Findings from online panel data that examined two election campaigns in Israel offered some credence to this proposition (Tsfati et al., 2021). Specifically, PSR with Netanyahu was a positive predictor of voting for his party and a negative predictor for voting for the opposition party. Moreover, changes in the level of PSR experienced by Israeli voters between the two elections also predicted shifts in support and loyalty toward the parties.

There is much more research yet to be done on the implications of PSR with political figures, but so far, findings from studies like those outlined above paint a remarkably consistent picture, demonstrating a strong association between PSR and subsequent support for a given politician. In this regard, tropes like politicians—or more likely, the subordinates who are roped in on their behalf—kissing babies on the campaign trail or officiating a county fair hot dog eating contest could actually constitute a sophisticated method to engender PSR with constituents that will pay dividends down the road (Gilson, 2012).

The Promises and Challenges of Measuring PSRs With Politicians

There are a number of complicating factors associated with the measurement of political PSRs, some of which are common to the literature of parasocial phenomena writ large (for a discussion, see Chapter 4). Generally speaking, the parasocial phenomena literature has been notorious for measurements that fail to distinguish PSR (a feeling of intimacy that media users can continuously experience either during or outside of the context of a particular media exposure) from PSI (a sense of a mutual interaction with the media personae during exposure). In fact, the canonical scale of PSI that was developed by A. M. Rubin et al. (1985) has been found to in fact be a more valid measure of PSR (Dibble et al., 2016; Chapter 4 this volume). Although recent decades have seen a marked increase in the attention given to measurements of PSR, there is still room for improvement given that many studies continue to use the terms and their measures interchangeably or simply propose new measures that have little to do with parasocial phenomena.

Other measurement-related challenges are more unique to the political context. Keeping in mind that voters often develop personal attachments to political parties and candidates, it stands to reason that a PSR is far from the only way in which these personal relationships can manifest. In fact, there is a long line of research demonstrating that variables like trust and credibility play important roles in predicting political support. Although a thorough explication of these concepts is far beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth pausing here to clarify some notable differences between politically relevant PSRs and more established constructs within the same semantic field. After all, before introducing a new measure, it is critical to ensure that it offers something unique that is not already covered by existing predictors.

The concept of trust has been extensively used to predict political support. Trust is often defined as "relations over time between two sides: a trustor, the side that places trust, and a trustee" (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003, p. 505), where there is an expectation on the part of the trustor that the word, promise, or verbal or written statement of the trustee can be relied on (Rotter, 1967). This idea of an unwritten contract between trustors and trustees is markedly different from PSRs with politicians, which, as in a friendship, has space for forgiving transgressions, lying, and rigging the system—especially when perceived as in the interest of the politician's supporters (e.g., Gabriel et al., 2018). Moreover, while the level of institutional trust is gradually decreasing in most Western countries, there are some reasons to suspect that the level of personal attachment to political leaders—often referred to as a cult of personality—is on the rise (McAllister, 2007; Metz et al., 2020). There might therefore be a strong case that as personal trust overtakes institutional trust, PSRs with politicians become an increasingly important predictor of political support.

Parasocial relationships with politicians can be seen as overlapping with perceptions of credibility, which typically refer to perceptions of a source's ability or motivation to offer accurate and truthful information (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). In the persuasion literature, source credibility is defined as "the attitude toward a source of communication held at a given time by a receiver" (McCroskey, 1997, p. 87) and is based on perceptions of source expertise, trustworthiness, and goodwill (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Although perceptions of credibility can generate positive evaluations of politicians and potential political action (Schartel Dunn & Nisbett, 2014), they are not necessarily related to PSRs (e.g., Landreville & Niles, 2019). Moreover, in recent years, scholars have suggested that perceptions of credibility are perhaps less applicable to value-laden domains such as politics (Walter et al., 2021). As argued by Lewandowsky et al. (2012): "Judgments of a source's credibility are themselves a function of beliefs: If you believe a statement, you judge its source to be more credible" (p. 119). According to this view, a judgment of credibility may be better understood as an outcome rather than a predictor of political support, which makes it rather different from PSRs.

Beyond the task of conceptually distinguishing political PSRs from related constructs, the actual measurement of such relationships is another challenge entirely. Arguably the

first attempt to propose a measure of PSR that focuses on political candidates is the "drinking buddy" measure. This single-item measure is frequently used in political polls and asks simply: "Is this candidate someone you would feel comfortable with while having a beer at a local bar?" (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009). And indeed, preferring to drink with a particular candidate has been empirically shown to be associated with perceptions of the candidate's assertiveness, responsiveness, and authenticity (Powell et al., 2014). Because it relates to interpersonal attraction, the question could be interpreted as a single-item measure of parasocial behavior (Powell et al., 2014).

Using the logic of convergent validity (the principle that a new measure should be closely associated with similar constructs), if the drinking buddy preference serves as a proxy measure for PSR with a candidate, then it should also predict other types of interpersonal attraction. This assumption was tested among college students who voted in the 2008 U.S. elections. These participants were asked to rate the presidential candidates, Barack Obama and John McCain, as potential drinking buddies (Powell et al., 2012). As so often happens in research, however, a nicely articulated hypothesis found itself face to face with uncooperative data, resulting in mixed findings. In this case, preference for a drinking buddy was able to predict higher interpersonal attraction (task and social attraction), but not perceived similarity (attitudinal and background similarity). While the authors explained these contradictory findings by suggesting that "voters may view perceived similarity as an important but not essential factor" (2012, p. 1029), it is equally plausible that the single-item drinking buddy measure cannot fully capture the complex nature of parasocial phenomena. Beyond the inconsistent findings, there are additional limitations associated with this measure, including its overt focus on the stereotypically masculine activity of drinking at a bar, which probably underestimates support for female candidates, as well as the somewhat controversial fact that not everyone enjoys beer. At least one of these limitations has been addressed with the more recent iteration of the drinking buddy measure, including more beverage options, such as soda or coffee.

Interestingly, the notion of sharing a beverage or a meal as a proxy for PSRs with politicians has also found its way into the newer four-item scale Parasocial Relationships With Political Figures (PSR-P) (Hakim & Liu, 2021; see Box 4.12 for scale items). The scale highlights the challenge of untangling the uniquely relational qualities of PSRs from related but distinct constructs such as liking and support. Nevertheless, the scale has been used in three culturally and politically diverse countries (Indonesia, New Zealand, and the United States) and has been validated in a variety of ways by showing its unique nature when compared to related constructs such as political ideology, political interest, and PSI. This scale shows impressive relevance across a variety of cultures and political systems, but it remains to be seen whether the PSR-P can be used to predict support for political figures or actual voting behavior.

Another newly developed political parasocial relationship (PPSR) measure takes on that next piece. In the context of the political turmoil in the United States following

President Trump's electoral win, Cohen and Holbert (2021) derived 13 items from the canonical 20-item PSI-Scale (A. M. Rubin et al., 1985). Tailoring the measure to specific politicians, the scale included items such as "X [politician's name] makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend." Although still a new measurement, the PPSR measure has been successfully employed to predict support for politicians, as well as actual voting behavior, in several different countries, with remarkable ability to explain the variance in political support. Following its success, a shorter four-item version of the measure was recently administered to predict support for Israeli politicians (Tsfati et al., 2021), affirming PSRs as a linchpin of political support and offering an easy-to-measure construct, especially compared to traditional lengthy scales intended to measure PSRs with media personae (e.g., A. M. Rubin et al., 1985).

The Future of Research Into PSRs and Political Participation

Although research in media effects has long established the importance of social influence on political participation (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), only recently have researchers begun investigating the parasocial parallel of these effects. While intriguing findings and progress have been made, this research is still only in its infancy, and there is still a long way to go. At this point, the most straightforward and important way to advance research into the effects of PSRs on political participation is simply the accumulation of more, and better, data. To that end, a number of gaps and opportunities are especially notable. First, it is impossible to ignore the fact that a considerable amount of research thus far is tied to specific charismatic leaders, such as Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu, and, with few exceptions (Hakim & Liu, 2021), has primarily focused on Western political contexts. This limitation begs the question of whether PSR with politicians is a more general phenomenon that can explain political participation for different types of leaders, various political systems, and geographical regions, or whether it is reserved for selected groups of highly visible and outspoken individuals, mainly in Western countries. Some of the research reviewed in this chapter (e.g., Cohen & Holbert, 2021; Tsfati et al., 2021) suggests that voters can develop meaningful relationships with a variety of politicians, which in turn influence political support, but more data are still needed.

Second, one of the greatest ironies of PSR research is its almost exclusive reliance on cross-sectional data, even though it is clear that relationships evolve over time (for a review, see Chapter 5). This tendency to focus on a single snapshot survey reflects a broader issue in PSR research and is not in itself unique to political PSRs. That said, the real-world behaviors and social consequences of political engagement make this a particularly important dynamic to consider. The oversight is especially glaring given the inherent ups and downs of political campaigns and careers. For instance, successful performances in debates, high-profile endorsements, or unflattering revelations and political gaffes are all likely to influence the intensity and quality of PSRs, but as of yet, we have very little insight as to how these effects might play out. To better account for both the resilience

and evolution of political PSRs over time, we will need more studies in the area of political PSRs to move toward longitudinal and dynamic designs (e.g., Bond, 2021).

Third, and relatedly, this reliance on cross-sectional data also limits the ability to confidently identify the unique causal effects of PSRs with politicians. For example, although the research summarized in this chapter suggested that PSRs with politicians predict political participation and support, it is equally plausible that PSRs are an outcome of an already-existing political support, or that PSRs and political support are both triggered by some other factor, such as empathy or reliance on specific news sources. The paucity of causal evidence on the effects of PSRs is understandable given the fact that it is difficult to experimentally manipulate relationships. After all, researchers cannot randomly allocate people into conditions with PSRs and conditions without PSRs. In recent years, however, more and more studies have found creative ways to bypass this obstacle by manipulating the exposure to media personae (e.g., Bond, 2021), priming participants to think about their favorite celebrities (e.g., Walter et al., 2022), or extending exposure to fictional characters over time (e.g. Bond, 2021; Schiappa et al, 2005).

Beyond unanswered empirical questions, future research will also benefit from more attention to theoretical concerns. Most of the work summarized in this chapter was motivated not by theoretical questions, but rather by practical issues such as improving current PSR measurements or predicting support for specific politicians. As a result, it remains to be seen whether PSRs with politicians are best understood as yet another context to study parasocial phenomena or as a distinctly different subarea within this literature. As more empirical evidence emerges, theoretical questions are likely to move front and center, with researchers attempting to identify underlying mechanisms or elucidate boundary conditions between PSRs with politicians and other types of relationships. One promising theoretical direction concerns a continuum of PSRs (Giles, 2002, and Chapter 2 this volume), distinguishing relationships with politicians as perhaps less one-sided than those with other types of media personae, such as athletes or actors. Politicians are often interested in maintaining a line of communication with their constituents, and there are ample opportunities to get some sort of feedback from politicians or at least their staff, even if the relationship largely remains imaginary and parasocial. This type of continuum of parasociability may constitute a new way of theorizing PSRs with politicians and parasocial phenomena in general. Another future theoretical direction focuses on uncovering the mechanisms by which fictional politicians may come to have political influence through PSRs. Do such characters set norms that real politicians are then compared and held to? Is there a persuasive process by which ideologies of characters are adopted by audiences? Perhaps there's another mechanism entirely at play. Here insights from marketing research on phenomena like consumer intimacy and "brand love" (Albert et al., 2008) might offer some helpful theoretical purchase. Finally, as modern democratic politics continue to evolve, often along more personalized and polarized lines (Pew, 2020), it will be all the more important to study the implications of the blurring celebrity/politician distinction.

If citizens perceive politics as entertainment, how do they weigh the very real impact of political power and decision-making on everyday lives? If traditional markers of credibility and expertise are deemed insufficient, what will replace them, and why? Political communication has already been grappling with such questions (Marshall, 2020), but PSR research could provide distinct and valuable contributions to advance this area.

One watershed moment in the presidency and legacy of Abraham Lincoln illustrates the potential effect of such semi-parasocial relationships. According to White House documents, Abraham Lincoln's decision to grow the iconic beard that ultimately became an indelible part of his image was prompted by the unsolicited advice of an 11-year-old fan. In a letter to the president, young Miss Grace Bedell urged Lincoln to grow a beard to hide his gaunt, worry-lined face, suggesting it would make him more popular with voters (Latson, 2014). Apparently, the 16th U.S. president took Bedell's advice to heart, even signing his response letter to her, "Your true friend" (Pinsker, 2011). One month after receiving the letter, Lincoln allowed his beard to grow, and by many estimates, he is still ranked as the most popular U.S. president (Smith, 2021). Correlation certainly does not imply causation, but suffice to say, PSRs with politicians seem to influence political participation in sometimes unexpected ways. Now, it is up to research and theory to clarify and catalogue these effects and offer a deeper understanding of both parasocial phenomena and modern politics.

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CHAPTER

16 Effects of Parasocial Experiences With Spokespersons on Consumer Behavior

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the utility of examining parasocial experiences (PSEs) in marketing, communication, and advertising research, specifically in the context of brand and product endorsements. The role of PSEs in various theories of persuasion in consumer research is applied to two domains: traditional celebrity endorsements on legacy media and social media and endorsements made by social media influencers, such as YouTubers and Instagram celebrities. Further, the chapter explicates the differences between these two types of media figures in the context of brand and product endorsements and discusses the unique importance of PSEs in driving their effects. Finally, a review of research and theoretical models highlights the importance of PSEs in the underlying effects of endorsers.

Key Words: persuasion, endorsement, celebrity, social media, influencers, personal construct theory, meaning transfer model, source credibility, persuasion knowledge model, entertainment overcoming resistance model

Introduction

Endorsement and persuasion literature has a decades-long research tradition that spans back at least 50 years and covers a multitude of aspects of the related phenomena in consumer behavior (Halder et al., 2021; Schimmelpfennig & Hunt, 2020). However, product endorsement and persuasion are much older phenomena, as people have always been exposed to the influence of others while searching for experiences and opinions about products and services to lessen the risks and ease the decision-making process related to purchases. Prior research has concentrated on celebrity endorsements in legacy media, such as television advertisements and product placements (Stephens et al., 1996; Stern et al., 2007). However, more recently, the focus has shifted toward the endorsements made by peer consumers and social media influencers (SMIs) as well as identifying the formation and outcomes of source credibility and endorsement effectiveness (Amos et al., 2008; Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Kim & Hancock, 2017; Munnukka et al., 2019; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Wojdynski, 2016). The current understanding suggests that the spokesperson's (a

celebrity or an SMI) characteristics, affect, brand fit, and social influence play key roles in terms of the credibility and overall effectiveness of the endorsement (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Reinikainen et al., 2020). In addition, the audience's perceptions of the spokesperson as a peer and the commercial intent of the message have been highlighted in prior research (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Munnukka et al., 2016; Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014; Wojdynski, 2016).

Moreover, based on the current research, an endorsement effect is generally triggered by the identification process with the spokesperson (Schimmelpfennig & Hunt, 2020). Specifically, identification requires the creation of images and brands that allow advertisers to attach meanings to products and transform them into lifestyles (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004). Accordingly, through this process, advertisers are enabled to link the characteristics, feelings, and emotions that are connected to the spokesperson to the endorsed product and brand in the minds of the audience. Therefore, the mere use of a spokesperson does not automatically lead to a successful and effective endorsement as the audience needs to identify with the spokesperson for the effect to take place.

For an individual to feel close to and identify with the spokesperson, a social connection is required as it allows the arousal of feelings and emotions as well as the formation of trust due to higher perceived familiarity, which increases the likelihood of identification with the spokesperson and higher endorsement acceptance (e.g., S. S. Lee et al., 2021; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Moreover, the role of social connections is best witnessed in the social media context, where building and maintaining networks are inherent parts of communication (e.g., van Noort et al., 2012). These connections between a spokesperson (i.e., an SMI) and the audience generate knowledge and beliefs about the former, which create a feeling of closeness and influence the perceptions of and reactions to the published content. However, in most cases, these relationships are parasocial in nature, as instead of an actual reciprocal social relationship between a spokesperson and audience, there is an illusionary feeling of a relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956), with the audience members knowing a lot about the spokesperson but not vice versa. Further, the knowledge, emotions, and beliefs formed through the content (both personal and commercial) shared by the spokesperson lead to a stronger identification process as well as closer parasocial relationships and therefore influence the way individuals react to their endorsements (Sundermann & Munnukka, 2022).

Although interest in the role of social connections and especially parasocial experiences (PSEs) in effective marketing and communication has been increasing rapidly (e.g., Jin et al., 2021; Leite & Baptista, 202l; Munnukka et al., 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020), the current understanding of the role of PSEs between the spokespersons and audience in the context of brand and product endorsements is still limited. For example, Knoll and Schramm (2015) showed how social influence affects product endorsements published by peer consumers, and van Noort et al. (2012) and Zarouali et al. (2018) studied the role of social tie strengths on attitudes toward persuasive product-related content on social

media. However, the understanding of how PSEs between celebrity or SMI endorsers and their audiences are formed and lead to successful product endorsements through the identification and meaning transfer processes is still limited.

In this chapter, we describe the present knowledge about the role of PSEs in the context of brand and product endorsements and provide directions for future research. We begin by discussing the evolution of research on the effects of PSEs in the context of brand and product endorsements and the differences between various kinds of endorsers. Next, the theoretical understanding of PSEs in endorsements is introduced along with four theoretical models of persuasion. To conclude, avenues for future research are proposed.

Evolution of Studies on the Effects of PSEs in Relation to Brand and Product Endorsements

Studying the effects of PSEs in relation to brand and product endorsements can be traced back to the beginning of the 1990s when several researchers took interest in the role of PSEs in television shopping. The studies found connections between purchase intention and PSEs with the presenters (Auter & Moore, 1993; Grant et al., 1991; Stephens et al., 1996), thus suggesting that PSEs had a significant role in supporting the effectiveness of televised brand and product endorsements. These studies were followed by research concentrating on product placement in television programming (see, e.g., Stern et al., 2007). The findings supported those from television shopping: Brand attitudes of audience members seemed to align with those of the characters on screen (Russell et al., 2006).

These studies laid the groundwork for later research on consumer behavior and PSEs in the context of online and social media. The developments were interestingly forecast by some authors in the 1990s itself. Auter and Moore (1993), for example, anticipated growth in "interactive shopping via home computers" and suggested that PSEs might have something to lend to understanding these processes. Specifically, they asked whether "parasocial interaction [will] be an essential element for this newer service, as it apparently was for cable shopping" (Auter & Moore, 1993, p. 434). Stephens et al. (1996) were also excited by the new possibilities of future technologies. They implied that PSEs were "of great value in the selling of products through media that offer the opportunity for two-way communication" and that "as technology evolves and it becomes easier and more cost-efficient to interact with consumers, the establishment of such relationships may grow even more essential" (Stephens et al., 1996, p. 199).

As predicted, after the turn of the century and with the introduction of new social media platforms, the context of endorsements in both practice and research started shifting. Thorson and Rodgers (2006), who studied the perceived interactivity and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) of political candidates, were among the first to consider the role of PSEs in blogs. They concluded that "this finding strongly suggests . . . that parasocial

interaction is a phenomenon in Internet-mediated interactions, just as it is for television viewers and radio listeners" (Thorson & Rodgers, 2006, p. 40), thus expanding the study of PSEs from legacy to social media. Moreover, Colliander and Dahlén (2011) were also early in studying the connection between PSEs with bloggers and purchase intention of products endorsed in their blogs. They found that fashion blogs were, in fact, able to create higher brand attitudes and purchase intentions than online magazines—an effect that they explained by the parasocial interactions with bloggers (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). Lueck (2015) was also among the pioneers with her study about Kim Kardashian's Facebook presence. She introduced the concept of "parasocial advertising," which refers to promoting an entire lifestyle and not merely a single brand. Lueck (2015, p. 102) also stated that: "It is of high advertising value to adopt a celebrity-endorser strategy on social networking sites that is based on Parasocial Interaction."

Moreover, the development of digital technologies is apparent in how research on the effects of PSEs has evolved, with the initial emphasis on legacy media gradually shifting toward online and social media. This development has also caused the introduction of new types of endorsers. Studies of spokespersons were first interested in actors and presenters on television and radio, and then the attention shifted toward bloggers, vloggers, and Instagram celebrities. This group of endorsers—understood as SMIs or "a new type of independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (Freberg et al., 2011, p. 90)—has dominated the research on endorsement effectiveness at the beginning of the 2020s. This corresponds to the growth of the so-called influencer marketing industry, which was valued at close to USD14 billion in 2021; it was up from close to USD2 billion in 2016 and from around USD10 billion in 2020 (Santora, 2022).

Additionally, the introduction of SMIs has prompted discussions, which are supported by the current literature, on whether these new types of spokespersons might be more effective as endorsers than so-called traditional celebrities, such as athletes, actors, and supermodels. For example, Schouten et al. (2020) showed that individuals tend to find influencers more identifiable and credible than traditional celebrities. Further, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) also suggested that the credibility of SMIs is higher than that of celebrities. In addition, Enke and Borchers (2019) noted that celebrities are less attainable than SMIs, and the results from the study by Pöyry et al. (2019) implied that the content provided by SMIs is perceived as more authentic than that by celebrities.

However, S. S. Lee et al. (2021) contradicted these results as they found that celebrities received far better results than SMIs in terms of perceived expertise and intentions to follow these accounts on social media. They credited these results in part to attractiveness and familiarity in terms of seeing SMIs as peers. In fact, SMIs are often referred to in the literature as friends (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016) or even family members (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Reinikainen et al., 2020). However, while these above-mentioned studies have found differences in how differently SMIs and

celebrities are perceived in terms of their authenticity, credibility, and attainability, there seem to be no suggestions in the current literature regarding whether there are differences in the intensity of PSEs that people have with either SMIs or celebrities and how PSEs with various kinds of endorsers connect to endorsement outcomes. This suggests that PSEs are built similarly regardless of the status of their target.

It can even be considered a possibility that the public personae of traditional celebrities and SMIs are coming closer together. Celebrities—who were once thought of as distant, careful about their privacy, and controlling over their public images—are increasingly opening up their personal lives on social media, thus becoming more familiar to and intimate with their fans and followers. In a way, celebrities are starting to resemble SMIs, who, in contrast, are turning into the likes of traditional celebrities. For instance, traditional media constantly covers the lives of SMIs, and with millions of followers, many influencers have less time for interaction. Therefore, they have staff and assistants who take care of their social media accounts, thus possibly growing a distance to their followers. In fact, it is common that studies also refer to YouTubers, for example, as celebrities these days (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Rihl & Wegener, 2019).

Based on the above, it seems plausible that in the future, the distinction between the so-called traditional celebrities and SMIs, with millions of followers, will also become less meaningful in terms of endorsements and otherwise. Instead, it might be more meaningful to compare various kinds of "online celebrities," such as mega-, micro- (Jin & Muqaddam, 2021), and meso-influencers (Boerman, 2020) who differ in not only their follower counts but also persuasive powers. In terms of endorsements, influencers with a small number of followers might be useful when looking for endorsers who can address and influence a niche target group, as such influencers often have a very committed and faithful followership (Cervantes-Guzmán, 2020).

Moreover, the latest wave of studies in endorsement effectiveness have acknowledged that audience members can experience PSEs with and be affected by not only other people but also chatbots (Tsai et al., 2021), animated spokescharacters (Zhou et al. 2021), and even pets (Jacobson et al., 2022). Additionally, virtual influencers and other characters created through computer-generated imagery (CGI), such as Lil Miquela, have also caught the attention of both practitioners and researchers in communication and marketing (Block & Lovegrove, 2021).

Based on the number and variety of studies on endorsements on social media over the years, it seems fair to say that Auter and Moore (1993) were correct, and that PSEs indeed offer intriguing ways to understand the processes of endorsements made in the online environment with various kinds of endorsers. In order to thoroughly understand the role of PSEs in the context of product endorsements, the next section delves deeper into describing the phenomena of persuasion, endorsement, and PSEs and how these are interconnected.

Understanding PSEs, Persuasion, and Product and Brand Endorsements

To be able to explain the role that PSEs have in persuasion, it is necessary to understand the origins of the phenomenon. In this section, we only briefly visit the nature of the PSE, which is more thoroughly discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

Between Social and Parasocial

According to Reeves and Nass (1996, p. 12), a PSE stems from the way human brains have evolved over the long history of humankind and have been unable to adapt to the stimuli provided by recently developed modern technology, such as virtual reality. Specifically, human brains are still unable to differentiate between interactions in real life and online virtual environments or with real friends and simulated or artificial friends, such as television actors, people encountered on social media, or even virtual influencers (CGIs) (Kanazawa, 2002). Due to this inability to distinguish between social and parasocial relationships, the response tends to be similar in both of the aforementioned circumstances (Perse & Rubin, 1989). The consequences are seen in various contexts where people in parasocial interactions react to them as if they are real social experiences. For example, audiences assess actors in movies or TV series based on the character of their roles rather than distinguishing between their actual personality and their acting (Tal-Or & Papirman, 2007; Tukachinsky, 2020). This phenomenon is also seen among celebrities and SMIs. The audience's PSEs with them cause reactions that are similar to those to real social experiences.

The current understanding of the PSE phenomenon on an individual level is predominantly based on three theories: uncertainty reduction, personal construct, and social exchange (Cole & Leets, 1999). The first theory suggests that following a media persona for a long time enables the formation of a parasocial relationship, and as the follower learns to know and anticipate how the person behaves, higher intimacy, liking, and decreased uncertainty are perceived (Berger, 2011, 1986; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Perse & Rubin, 1989). Meanwhile, the personal construct theory takes on another perspective of PSE by expecting that the audience applies their learned interpersonal social constructs formed in true social interactions to those with media personae and behaves according to these learned behavioral patterns (Delia & O'Keefe, 1982). Therefore, the response of the audience facing PSEs with celebrities or SMIs follows their learned behavioral constructs that do not distinguish between real social experiences and PSEs. On the other hand, social exchange theory postulates that a PSE by a media persona can be seen as a balancing act between possible costs and rewards (Homans, 1974). The costs often relate to negative emotional outcomes (such as embarrassment or anxiety) or high cognitive effort. The rewards can be, for example, pleasure and satisfaction resulting from consuming enjoyable and useful content published by a media persona. While individuals try to maximize rewards, cost avoidance is generally emphasized in

human behavior (Kahneman & Tversky, 2013). Thus, according to this theory, PSEs are understood to lead to positive outcomes among the audience, as the interactions and formation of relationships with media personae helps lessen the perceived risk of the interaction and provide rewarding experiences by the consumption of content that is trustworthy, enjoyable, and useful.

History of Theorization of Endorsement–Appeal

The above discussion suggests that the PSE has an important role in the audience's reactions to content published by a media persona. However, to better understand the influence of PSE processes on the effectiveness of product endorsements (that have commercial objectives), the construct itself needs to relate to the processes of persuasion and endorsement. According to Kelman (1958), the persuasion effect can be caused by three different processes: compliance, identification, and internalization. Here, compliance refers to an individual's acceptance of being influenced by another to obtain a positive reaction from a specific person or group. Quite similarly, in the case of identification, an individual accepts another person's influence to satisfy the other and maintain the relationship. Finally, internalization refers to a process by which an individual seeks to satisfy their personal needs by accepting the influence. Therefore, they behave according to influence only if it is relevant to their desires and needs.

In the presence of compliance and identification, individuals are found to more often behave according to a spokesperson's aspirations when they are being monitored or in a strong relationship with the latter (Kelman, 1958). Meanwhile, internalization relates most closely to product endorsement situations where the acceptance of the endorsement message arises from the audience's genuine need and desire for the product or service being endorsed. If they do not have the need or the need is not formed during the interaction, the persuasion suggestion is not followed. Moreover, to reflect the processes of PSE with persuasion, clear intersections can be found. A higher persuasion effect is created by means of a spokesperson publishing both personal and commercial content that matches their image as well as interests of the audience while also providing experiences of interactions by responding to the questions and wishes of the latter. With these PSE actions, the spokesperson enhances the audience's identification process, willingness to comply with the persuasion message, and likelihood that the content is seen as useful and interesting.

Today, product endorsements by celebrities and SMIs are commonly compensated (e.g., monetary or free products) by the brand owners and have clear persuasion objectives. The roots of persuasion and commercial product endorsements are therefore clearly intertwined. In the next section, we discuss the endorsement phenomenon in more detail through the five key theories of endorsement and seek to connect them to persuasion and PSE constructs.

Theoretical Perspectives on Brand and Product Endorsement and the Role of PSEs

Previous endorsement research has been mostly based on the following: source credibility model, source attractiveness model, matchup hypothesis, meaning transfer model, persuasive knowledge model, and entertainment overcoming resistance model (EORM). To provide a more thorough understanding of brand and product endorsement research, in this section, we first discuss each of these models and then integrate them with the PSE construct.

Source Credibility

The source credibility model is the most popular perspective in previous endorsement literature. It is based on social psychology research (Hovland & Weiss, 1951–1952; Hovland et al., 1953) that expects the effectiveness of the endorsement to depend on the expertise and trustworthiness of the source (i.e., a spokesperson). Here, the former is understood as the spokesperson's perceived ability to make endorsements, whereas the latter refers to their motive or willingness to make the endorsement (McCracken, 1989; Ohanian, 1991).

Explaining endorsement effectiveness through the association between source credibility and PSEs has been quite popular in studies that examined influencer endorsements. For example, researchers have suggested that PSEs support the perceived credibility of SMIs, and that perceived credibility mediates the relationship between PSEs and brand-related outcomes, such as brand attitude and trust as well as purchase intention (Munnukka et al., 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020) and the evaluation of endorsement content (Breves, Amrehn, et al., 2021). The relationship between source credibility and PSEs has also been suggested to work in the opposite direction. Specifically, source credibility supports PSE, which then further contributes to outcomes such as purchase intention and product interest (Lou & Kim, 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020). In addition, it has been suggested that source credibility and PSEs are parallel constructs with other constructs, such as source and physical attractiveness, affecting both of them positively, and that both of them equally contribute to purchase intention (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Therefore, recent research suggests that the credibility of the spokesperson is closely connected to the PSE. This credibility and success in providing PSEs go hand in hand, leading to a higher endorsement effect. Thus, the content by a spokesperson who is considered credible is also likelier to be accepted and found useful than that by one with low credibility (Biswas et al., 2006; Kelman, 1961).

Source Attractiveness Model

The source attractiveness model has similar roots to the previous model, but it considers the endorsement effect to be formed through the perceived familiarity, likability, and similarity

of the spokesperson (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Here, attractiveness refers not only to physical attractiveness but also to social attractiveness and attitudinal homophily (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Higher overall attractiveness of the spokesperson is expected to improve endorsement persuasiveness as the audience perceives higher aspiration to identify with such spokespersons than those who are less attractive (Kelman, 1958).

Much like the source credibility model, the source attractiveness model is rather common in endorsement effectiveness studies, indicating that their effects are very similar: There is a positive association between attractiveness and PSEs, followed by a positive effect on brand-related outcomes (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Moreover, Aw and Labrecque (2020) suggested that the difference between source attractiveness and credibility lies in the fact that attractiveness is an affective element, while credibility is a cognitive element, which includes the assessments of the expertise and trustworthiness of the endorser. Therefore, it seems that in the contexts of celebrity and SMI endorsements, PSEs can be associated with both cognitive and affective processes.

Matchup Hypothesis

The matchup hypothesis contributes to the understanding of endorsement effectiveness by further clarifying why certain endorsements are not as effective as others despite the credibility and attractiveness of the spokespersons being the same (McCracken, 1989). According to this hypothesis, the effectiveness of an endorsement is also contingent on the spokesperson's fit with the product (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Till & Busler, 2000). Further, an endorsement is the most effective when there is congruence between the spokesperson, product or brand, and target audience (Kamins & Gupta, 1994). When the matchup is supported, the audience's identification with the spokesperson is enhanced, and their image is integrated with the endorsement message, resulting in more positive attitudes and higher behavioral intentions (e.g., Kamins, 1990; Kelman, 1961).

Moreover, the matchup hypothesis can be found in endorsement effectiveness studies that take interest in, for example, the perceived fit between endorsers and brands (Breves et al., 2019; Qian & Park, 2021) and the self-congruence between audience members and endorsed brands (Zhu et al., 2019) as well as influencers (Xu & Pratt, 2018). Within these contexts, PSEs have been found to moderate the effects of endorser–product fit (Phua et al., 2018), for example, which suggests that those with higher PSEs are more likely to look past the possible conflicts in the congruences between endorsers and the products they endorse (Escalas & Bettman, 2017). These findings further highlight the role of PSEs in brand and product endorsements: High PSEs contribute to endorsement effectiveness and even pave the way in the case of possible incongruence.

Meanings Transfer Model

According to the meanings transfer model, the spokesperson transfers their cultural meanings to the endorsed brand and audience (McCracken, 1989). The meanings have

accumulated over time in past interactions with the audience, shared content, and other public appearances (Halder et al., 2021; Schimmelpfenning & Hunt, 2020). This transfer is inherently related to social interactions; therefore, a spokesperson provides PSEs by sharing personal and brand-related content with the audience, by which the social ties with the audience are strengthened and the cultural meanings of the spokesperson are integrated with the endorsed brand and audience. However, in comparison to the four other models of persuasion, the meaning transfer model has rarely been applied to the context of brand and product endorsements made by spokespersons. There seem to be no empirical studies that investigated, for example, how PSEs affect meaning transfer in celebrity or influencer endorsements.

Persuasion Knowledge Model

The persuasion knowledge model (PKM) entails "an individual's ability to distinguish commercial content (advertising) from editorial or entertainment content" (Evans et al., 2019, p. 366). The model posits that identifying a message as persuasion enables the audience to "recognize, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and remember persuasion attempts and to select and execute coping tactics believed to be effective and appropriate" (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 3). Critically, persuasion knowledge (PK) activation only occurs if the media user recognizes that the message has an unwanted persuasive intent. This realization, in turn, leads to negative attitudes toward, and critical processing of, the message (Moses & Baldwin, 2005).

The negative effects of PK activation on persuasion effectiveness have led advertisers to find new forms of advertising wherein persuasion is conducted through "softer" methods. Online advertising, in particular, is moving away from traditional display advertising formats toward new forms, such as native advertising, which are not always easily identified as paid advertisements (Campbell et al., 2013). The same trend is also witnessed in SMI marketing, which has quickly become an effective channel for communicating positive brand and product messages. The high persuasion effectiveness has been explained by the SMIs' ability to publish brand-related messages without activating PK among the audience (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019).

As the paid brand and product endorsements by spokespersons, such as SMIs, are not always easily identified by the audience, some regulators require an explicit disclosure of sponsorship to secure the consumers' rights to be aware of sponsored content and persuasive attempts (Evans et al., 2019). Prior evidence suggests that disclosure of sponsorship generally increases reactance to persuasion messages and thus reduces persuasion effectiveness (e.g., Moses & Baldwin, 2005). However, a few recent studies have shown that PSEs with SMI can mitigate the negative effects of sponsorship disclosures on endorsement effectiveness or even lead to positive total effects (Coco & Eckert, 2020; Hudders et al., 2020; Stubb et al., 2019; Sundermann & Munnukka, 2022). This highlights the complexity of the effect of the PKM and the role of PSE in the context of product endorsement effectiveness.

Entertainment Overcoming Resistance Model

Finally, the EORM can be seen to complement the PKM describing the mechanism through which PSEs mitigate resistance to persuasion (Moyer-Gousé, 2008). Persuasion resistance is understood as an individual's reaction against change in response when perceiving outside pressure for change (Knowles & Linn, 2004) and a need to secure one's freedom for forming attitudes and behaviors without outside pressure (Brehm, 1966). The EORM posits that when persuasive messages are incorporated into entertainment media, involvement with the content reduces resistance to persuasion, which further leads to greater attitudinal and behavioral persuasive outcomes (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). PSEs constitute one of the forms of involvement underlying the EORM (Breves, Liebers, et al., 2021).

The EORM has been examined in the context of traditional celebrity spokespersons (e.g., Tukachinsky, 2020). However, recently, Breves, Liebers, et al. (2021) provided empirical support for this model in the context of SMI. They found that the more audience members perceive SMIs as their "friends," the more they trust them and become more susceptible to the endorsements made by the SMIs. Furthermore, a strong relationship with SMIs and the audience that has been built over a long time through repeated engagements fosters the effects of PSEs on endorsement resistance.

Future Directions for Studies of PSEs and Endorsements

Previous literature on PSEs and endorsements has mainly examined the positive effects that they have on celebrities and SMIs as well as the brands that they endorse. For example, PSEs have been found to support the perceived credibility of SMIs (Munnukka et al., 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020) and positively affect the interpretation of messages provided by endorsers (Sundermann & Munnukka, 2022). Therefore, they contribute to positive brand perceptions and purchase behavior (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; J. E. Lee & Watkins, 2016).

However, not all PSEs are positive in nature (see Chapter 18 for a discussion of nonamicable parasocial relationships), and studies showed how PSEs might have negative consequences in terms of endorsements. Specifically, Colliander and Erlandsson (2015) found that perceived deception by a blogger negatively affects their audience members' PSE. Reinikainen et al. (2021) found a similar effect: A perceived betrayal by an SMI not only had a negative effect on a PSE with the influencer but also negatively affected attitude, trust, and purchase intention toward a brand that had been previously endorsed, with the PSE mediating this effect. Additionally, Reinikainen et al. (2021) found that a perceived betrayal by a brand can negatively affect the perceived coolness (a source characteristic) of the influencer who has endorsed the brand as well as the followers' PSEs.

Therefore, it seems that audience members' PSEs can be a major source of value to endorsers by contributing to their success and influence. However, PSEs can also turn into

kryptonite on social media if the endorsers engage in actions that are perceived negatively by audience members (see Chapter 6 on reactions to media figures' misbehavior). Further, the harm done to PSEs can also reflect on the partners and sponsors who work with endorsers. This indicates that if celebrities or influencers deceive or betray their followers, friends can turn into foes with negative repercussions for all parties. However, studies on these effects are still scarce and deserve further exploration in terms of exploring questions such as the following: How severe are the possible betrayals of trust in endorsement relationships, and can PSEs be mended?

As already shown, the development of technology has been a major driver in shaping both the practice and research of endorsements by spokespersons. Moreover, the current significant steps in technology relate to immersive experiences, augmented reality, and the metaverse. As the popularity of equipment allowing for these experiences, such as 360° cameras and virtual glasses, continues to grow, an increasing number of consumers can benefit from immersive experiences within their own homes (Fraustino et al., 2018, pp. 331–332). The lure of these virtual environments is that through immersion, they offer experiences of places that can be visited, not just viewed (Aitamurto et al., 2018). As immersion also seems to augment PSEs with people encountered in these environments (Banks & Bowman, 2014; Jin, 2010, 2011), these developments seem to offer intriguing directions for studying endorsements within immersive content. This includes the answering of questions such as the following: Is a PSE with a YouTuber stronger in immersive content than in ordinary content, and if so, does this also affect their endorsement?

Finally, a further future research direction relates to the application of different theoretical frameworks in studying the role and effects of PSEs on the endorsement effect. Meanwhile, current research has been increasingly emphasizing new forms of product endorsements moving from celebrity endorsement research to cover peer endorsers and SMIs (Knoll & Schramm, 2015; Munnukka et al., 2016; van Noort et al., 2012; Zarouali et al., 2018). However, the research on PSEs in product endorsements is highly concentrated from a theoretical framework perspective on source credibility (e.g., Reinikainen et al., 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020) or attractiveness (e.g., Aw & Chuah, 2021; Zhou et al., 2021). Further, the exploration of the matchup hypothesis and meanings transfer theory has gathered significantly less interest. In particular, the meanings transfer perspective has nearly been forgotten in recent PSE studies in the context of product endorsement. Therefore, future research should examine the role and effect of PSEs in driving congruence and integrating and transferring meanings between spokespersons, endorsed brands, and the audience. Furthermore, more research on the EORM is required to better understand the role of PSEs in attuning the resistance to persuasion in various media contexts. By extending the theoretical base, such research can provide a more thorough understanding of the role of PSEs in terms of the brand and product endorsement effects within different product, channel, and technological contexts.

Conclusions

This chapter discussed the PSE phenomenon from the perspectives of persuasion and product endorsement. A review of past research and connecting PSEs with the theoretical frameworks of endorsement and persuasion showed that the former can be considered to have a similar influence on the product endorsement effect than real social experiences. Thus, by providing PSEs, a spokesperson is able to form and maintain relationships with an audience and increase the acceptance of persuasive product and brand-related content.

Additionally, a PSE was also found to influence the endorsement effect through cognitive and affective routes. This highlights the need to assess the endorsement product, audience, and channel when planning product endorsement campaigns to decide whether to apply the cognitive endorsement or affective strategies. This also puts forward the notion that in today's endorsement marketing context, the selection of a spokesperson should not be done by selecting between celebrities and SMIs, but by selecting the spokesperson who is the most capable of providing the right set of PSEs. For example, for beauty products, a spokesperson perceived as attractive and possessing skills for providing affective PSEs would likely lead to the best endorsement effect. Meanwhile, in the case of technical consumer products, such as laptops, the cognitive endorsement strategy would likely lead to the best result. Here, the selected spokesperson should be perceived as credible and able to present content and opinions that are perceived as trustworthy and useful.

We also propose that the differences between legacy celebrities and SMIs are diminishing as celebrities are increasingly sharing personal content on social media, while the most popular SMIs are simultaneously starting to increasingly resemble traditional celebrities. Therefore, in the future, distinguishing between celebrities and SMIs may not be meaningful anymore. Instead, here, the focus should be on assessing the characteristics of spokespersons and their ability to provide the right set of PSEs depending on whether the affective or the cognitive endorsement strategy is applied.

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PART VI

Agenda for Future PS Research

CHAPTER

17 Beyond Friendship: A Call for Research on Non-amicable Parasocial Relationships

Rebecca Tukachinsky Forster *and* Melissa A. Click

Abstract

Past research and anecdotal evidence suggests that many audience members are exposed to media figures they dislike. However, their relationships with these media figures are not well understood in parasocial research. Building on scholarly media and fan studies on anti-fandom, we argue that these seemingly negative experiences are diverse, complex, and nuanced—they are more than merely the opposite of positive parasocial relationships (PSRs). The chapter theorizes several nonamicable parasocial experiences: pervasive negative PSRs (NPSRs) (formed with ubiquitous media figures one cannot escape); competitive NPSRs (involving a real or symbolic rivalry with the media user's PSR partner); loyal NPSRs (inability to break up with a disappointing PSR partner); and ludic/ironic PSRs (wherein individuals derive pleasure from disparaging an inferior media figure). The chapter concludes with a review of specific media and audience variables that can be instrumental in examining these different types of nonamicable PSRs.

Key Words: Anti-fandom, negative PSR, fandom, hatewatching, dislike, social comparison

Introduction

Mirroring the tendency of early interpersonal communication research that focused on "the bright side" of relationships, examination of parasocial experiences (PSEs) was mostly restricted to amicable relationships that audiences form with media figures. This bias toward positive parasocial relationships (PSRs) can be traced back to the conception of the field. In their germinal article, Horton and Wohl (1956) implied that since PSRs are voluntary, media users would not carry out such relationships unless they were desirable and pleasantly friendly. After all, many people avoid discord in their social lives, and while they may feel trapped in unpleasant nonmediated relationships, scholars have assumed individuals could (or would) easily escape dysfunctional PSEs. Because PSRs are typically one-sided (unless they cross over to social relationships) media users have few options for negotiation with the media figures they watch, and scholars have assumed that if dissatisfied they would terminate the relationship. As Horton and Wohl (1956, p. 215) wrote:

> The crucial difference in experience [of parasocial vs. social relationships] obviously lies in the lack of effective reciprocity, and this the audience cannot normally conceal from itself. To be sure, the audience is free to choose among the relationships offered, but it cannot create new ones. The interaction, characteristically, is one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development. There are, of course, ways in which the spectators can make their feelings known to the performers and the technicians who design the programs, but these lie outside the para-social interaction itself. Whoever finds the experience unsatisfying has only the option to withdraw.

However, media consumers' experiences prove to be more complex than the dichotomy of either accepting positive PSRs or opting for a parasocial breakup (PSB) when the relationship does not work out. Scrolling through copious angry and even hateful comments on social media and online discussion boards demonstrates that many media users expend tremendous time and energy expressing their frustration with media content that disappoints them. Gray (2003, p. 70) calls these media users "anti-fans" and describes them as "those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel." Adding to the complexity of this phenomenon, some fans are simultaneously profoundly attached to media characters and deeply disappointed in them. They generate alternative universes in fan fiction and fan video to negotiate and thus rework their relationships with media texts, adapting characters and plotlines to better meet fan expectations, especially when their appeals and demands to producers ("the powers that be") go unmet (Busse & Hellekson, 2006). Some fans may even leave fandom of the dissatisfying canonical text altogether to focus on their own worlds that they create to maintain their bonds with the characters.

Thus, alongside positive PSEs that resemble friendships, romantic relationships, or even parental-like feelings (Stever, 2009; Tukachinsky, 2011), many media users also often have negative PSEs (NPSEs) that entail feelings of discomfort with, dislike of, and animosity for other media personalities. However, while fandom scholars have been producing a rich body of work in this area for over two decades (e.g., see Click, 2019), parasocial researchers have given stunningly little consideration to the phenomenon of NPSEs. Hartmann et al. (2008) introduced the notion of NPSRs (negative PSRs), which was a critical first step to point to this previously overlooked type of PSRs. They also were the only ones to design a scale (antipathy) to capture it (see Chapter 4, Box 4.5). However, few parasocial studies have taken up the challenge introduced by Hartmann et al. to examine PSRs with disliked characters.

Dibble and Rosaen (2011) asked participants to reflect on liked or disliked television characters, whereas Tian and Hoffner (2010) asked fans of the television series *Lost* to select either their most liked or most disliked television character on that show. Participants in these studies were asked to complete a measure of the PSI-Scale of Rubin et al.

(1985) that asks viewers to rate the extent to which they think of the media figure as a friend, find the character's voice comforting, and emphasize with the character. Naturally, liked characters scored higher on this measure than the disliked characters, thereby validating Rubin's scale as a measure of amicable PSRs (see Chapter 4 for further discussion). However, these efforts did little to advance the understanding of what media users *do* experience in relation to these characters.

Two more recent studies (Bernhold, 2019; Jennings & Alper, 2016) utilized Hartmann's et al. (2008) NPSR scale. In both of these studies, participants had no trouble naming a media figure they strongly disliked, indicating frequent exposure to them. For instance, Bernhold (2019) reported withdrawing several participants from his sample of 55- to 77-year-old Americans because they were not involved in a romantic relationship at the time of the data collection (which was one of the variables examined in that study), but the researcher excluded no participants because of an inability to name a disliked media figure. Interestingly, the majority (72.5%) of the media personae listed in the study were real people rather than fictional characters. The most commonly mentioned personae were Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton (which is not surprising given that the survey was conducted in April 2017). Similarly, Jennings and Alper (2016) reported that of the 88 children aged 5–7 that they interviewed, only 12 were unable to name a disliked character. Moreover, the media figures that children identified as "like-friends" and the "opposite of a friend" characters seemed to appear in the same media content. Both their friend-like PSR and NPSR partners were mostly cartoon characters that children had encountered across multiple media platforms (from television and movies to video games and books) and brands (e.g., Disney, Nintendo). While these studies are novel and important in that they uniquely asked participants about NPSRs, they did not put the *experience* of this relationship in their center. They documented the prevalence of NPSRs, but did not shed light on what these relationships really mean to the audience members, what forms they take, their effects, and why they exist in the first place.

What *is,* then, the function of these common PSEs in media users' overall experiences with media and beyond? Do individuals try to avoid NPSEs or do (and why do) some individuals seek exposure to disliked media? Are NPSEs experienced as painful and unpleasant, or do any of the media users also find pleasure in these NPSEs? With the exception of Bernhold (2019), who tried to identify some psychological precursors and consequences of NPSEs (which are discussed later in this chapter), none of the above-listed studies seriously attempted to answer any of these questions. While there is a paucity of empirical research on PSRs with disliked media personae, theorization of these phenomena from a parasocial perspective is even more scarce, with efforts exclusively directed toward understanding amicable PSRs (e.g., Riles & Adams, 2021; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). Meanwhile, as mentioned above, there is a rich body of (anti)fandom scholarship that can shed light on the multitude of complex ways in which media users

relate to disliked media personalities and their NPSEs. Our goal is to bring these traditions together in hopes of moving both forward.

We agree with Gray (2021, p. 11) that "dislike is far from a simple failure to like, as instead it can have positive, ameliorative intent and is a reaction and response with its own presence, nature, and value. . . ." To explore negative orientations like dislike, this chapter outlines some types of NPSEs and their consequences. The theoretical framework presented here draws from media and fan studies scholarship that explores hate, dislike, and anti-fandom alongside the consumption of and involvement with disliked media content (Click, 2019; Gray, 2003, 2021). The chapter also draws on theories of media effects and interpersonal relationships to suggest some productive ways forward. This section starts with a thematic exploration of various NPSRs and the motivations that fuel them and follows with an examination of possible effects of these experiences.

Exploring Dislike, Hate, and NPSRs

There are few studies on NPSRs and even this research is limited to examining antipathy toward disliked media figures as a monolithic construct (e.g., Bernhold, 2019; Dibble & Rosaen, 2011). Conversely, we argue that the relationships and interactions with disliked media figures are complex and varied, and it is important to differentiate between various types of non-amicable PSRs based on the motivations driving them, their manifestations, and, ultimately, their potential consequences. Importantly, although for the sake of consistency with past terminology (e.g., Hartmann, 2008), we refer to these PSRs as "negative," we argue that non-amicable PSEs are more nuanced than this positive-negative dichotomy suggests. While these experiences are marked by audience members' negative feelings towards the media personas, the relationships themselves may be deemed by some individuals as positive, in a sense that these "negative" relationships are enjoyable and desirable. What follows is a proposed typology of four types of NPSRs with disliked media personalities.

Pervasive NPSRs

Some popular media and personalities—from Miley Cyrus and Kim Kardashian to Donald Trump—grow so ubiquitous that audiences are bound to have some sort of PSEs with them. Many media users develop positive PSRs with these media figures and texts, but others, unable to avoid the vastly popular media, will form NPSRs with them. Some of these media users may try to avoid disliked media figures but find they cannot escape them altogether. The ubiquity of the media and the users' unavoidable exposure to it can cultivate strong negative dispositions toward them and manifest fervent affective and cognitive responses when they inevitably come across them in the media. In fact, audiences do not even have to watch a text in its entirety to dislike like it, Gray (2021) insisted. If scholars begin to carefully investigate audiences' dislikes, Gray asserted, they are likely to

find that dislikes "have a great deal to say about what audiences perceive to be wrong with media, what is missing, what media could and should instead be and do" (p. 67).

This type of negative relationship is likely quite common for media audiences. Gray (2021, p. 39), for instance, found dislike due to the pervasive nature of media texts to be "constant" across the 216 interviews conducted for his book, *Dislike-Minded*. He recounted numerous examples of media viewers who felt strong dislike for popular media and who felt it was unavoidable, invasive, and incessant. Social ties and social pressures made tuning out challenging for these disliking audience members because they felt forced to watch while spending time with friends, family, roommates, and even coworkers who enjoyed the media that they disliked. Gray argued that "watching through gritted teeth" is a form of "social labor" that we regularly perform to please those we care about and generally just to feel like we "fit in" (p. 47).

The labor of watching what one dislikes may be unequally performed by marginalized viewers, who tend to be negatively represented in mainstream media (see Chapter 18 on marginalized racial and social identity). Thus, Gray (2021, p. 45) argued that we may "expect to see heightened levels of dislike amid marginalized individuals and communities, precisely because they are required more regularly to do the hard work of grinning and bearing it." Gray's respondents shared many specific reasons for disliking media that was seen as ubiquitous. These reasons included repeated unwanted and unavoidable exposure; concerns about third-person effects (the potential of these negative group depictions to have undesirable effects on other media users); the perceived "forced" nature of the exposures; and the feeling that invasive media even seeps into private and personal space.

Competitive PSRs

A second form of NPSRs emerges from a competition between media figures, teams, or messages, which Gray (2019) posited inherently creates anti-fandom. In other words, amicable PSRs and NPSRs are conjoined and complement each other. Sports presents an obvious example of this interconnection. Theodoropoulou (2007) demonstrated that rooting for one's favorite team can also cultivate negative feelings toward that team's rival. She described this orientation as "the anti-fan within the fan" and argued that anti-fans emerge when there are binary oppositions between fan groups, as is the case in her study of Greek football clubs. In this configuration, fans become anti-fans when their fan object, in this case a team, is threatened; anti-fandom becomes a strategy with which fans can "protect [their] fan object from the threat its 'counterforce' poses" (p. 325).[1]

Given that competition is an integral aspect of sports, it is not surprising that the first attempts to conceptualize and measure NPSRs have been done in the context of Formula One fans, validating a measure of NPSRs that fans of one driver experience with the rival driver (Hartmann et al., 2008). However, competitive NPSRs can also be relevant to fictional characters and celebrities. For example, Tukachinsky Forster (2022) documented the phenomenon of parasocial jealousy, experienced by individuals who harbor romantic

feelings toward a celebrity who then becomes romantically involved with another person in real life. Some of these fans can have strong negative feelings toward the romantic interest of their beloved celebrity, yet they will seek out every bit of information available in the media about their parasocial rival.

Rivalry can be more nuanced in the context of fictional characters. Media audiences of scripted programming become involved in PSRs with protagonists, rooting for a character's success as they work against adversaries. Building on Zillman's (1994) disposition theory, we posit that enjoyment is grounded in satisfying the audiences' hopes for the liked media figure's success as much as it is based on disparaging the disliked media figure and watching that character's downfall. Hence, viewers are regularly compelled to invest as much into hating a rival character as they invest into liking others. In other words, a PSR with a liked character is complemented by a strong NPSR with the antagonist who poses a threat to a beloved character's goals. Holladay and Click (2019) provided an example of this type of anti-fandom through their study of fan reaction to Skyler White, the wife of *Breaking Bad*'s anti-hero Walter White. Skyler came to be seen by some fans as an impediment to Walter's ascendancy as a meth producer and dealer, which resulted in the development of many online communities and forums dedicated to hating Skyler. The intensity of fan dislike of Skyler even transferred to the actress who portrayed Skyler, Anna Gunn, who spoke out about the hatred she had personally received in a 2013 op-ed in the *New York Times*.

Interestingly, Gray (2019) argued that competitive anti-fandom can be extended to explain anti-fandom in situations that do not (at least at first glance) seem to present rivalry. The competition is not always about patent win–lose relationships but instead lies in a struggle over the symbolic meaning that media content represents. Johnson (2007), for example, explored the online communication of fan factions surrounding *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* found on websites, newsgroups, and bulletin boards, documenting occurrences of what he called "fantagonism." Noting the evidence of factions found across media and fan studies scholarship, Johnson explored fan agitation around the series' sixth season to highlight the tensions among fan groups, and also between fans and producers. Some of the fantagonism Johnson noted involved "shippers" (fans who "root" for a particular relationship pairing among characters) who were hoping to see Buffy romantically linked to the character they believed was right for her (Angel, Spike, Riley, etc.). Fantagonism was also present because Season 6 was helmed by producer Marti Noxon while (then) beloved Joss Whedon stepped away from the series to work on the show *Firefly*. Noxon was a hated target of fans' disapproval of changes to the series in Season 6, and fans vehemently disagreed with each other about their perceived quality of Season 6. Johnson noted that these competitive struggles inside a fandom are about not only the interpretations of the text but also who is a legitimate fan. He found that: "For both sides, 'true fan' status necessitated appreciation of one aesthetic, one prescribed evaluative relationship to the text" (p. 290).

Scott (2019), likewise, traced a form of competitive anti-fandom that has developed within and between fandoms, particularly as fan activism around topics of diversity has grown and become more successful at changing production strategies at franchises like Marvel. Specifically, Scott documented the misogynistic exclusion of women and girls (and other marginalized groups, too) from mainstream fandoms by straight, white male fans that ultimately creates a binary between "fangirls" and "fanboys." Scott indicated that claims of authenticity are typically at the center of such rivalries and result in arguments about who truly "belongs" and who is an "imposter" in fandoms. Rivalries created by gender binaries can emerge within a fan group (e.g., Star Wars fans or Marvel fans) or between fan groups at venues like the annual Comic-Con International convention in San Diego, California. Gender became a flashpoint at Comic-Con in 2008, Scott recounted, when male fans rebelled against the large groups of female Twilight fans attending the convention, claiming Comic-Con belongs to them by insisting that the presence of Twilight fans "ruined" the convention.

Applying these examples to PSEs, the two media figures (the hero and the villain, two opposing teams) come to symbolize two conflicting themes or ideas. Further, disagreements commonly arise over who "authentically" belongs in a community supporting a media figure or franchise, or which characters or storylines are true to a series. Support for one media figure and opposition to the other can even become part of one's identity. For instance, in the example above, male Comic-Con fans' negative experiences with (mostly) female *Twilight* fans can result in dislike of *Twilight* characters, particularly in spaces that fans share. Occasionally, marketing of media content can specifically exploit group identities and fuel media users' experience of the PSRs as "us" versus "them," creating divisions between fans of different media content (*Buffy* vs. *Twilight*) or characters on the same show (Angel fans or Spike fans among *Buffy* fans).

Loyal NPSRs

Parasocial relationship research has a long-standing tradition of theorizing PSRs as the equivalent of interpersonal relationships and applies the same theoretical mechanisms to both types of amicable relationships (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). The same approach may be fruitful in examining NPSRs.

Rusbult (1987) proposed a typology of how individuals can respond to relational challenges with other people. The responses are positioned along two dimensions. The goal of the response is to either maintain or terminate the relationship, and they do so either actively or passively. For instance, individuals may withdraw from the unsatisfying relationship (exit and neglect) or make an active effort to repair it (voice). However, individuals can also opt for "loyalty"—a passive response in which the individual remains in the relationship in a tacit hope for improvement. Research on these dissatisfaction management strategies in the interpersonal context identified several conditions that make

individuals more likely to implement loyalty—a constructive but passive coping strategy (Rusbult, 1987; Rusbult et al., 1986).

Applying insights from this line of research, there are several reasons for media users to engage in such passive and loyal, yet frustrating, PSRs.

Hopefulness. First, loyalty is present when relationship alternatives are scarce or believed to be worse than the current relationship, even if it is unsatisfying (Rusbult et al., 1986). We suggest similarly that media users may feel that they cannot afford to or do not want to lose their PSR even if they find it unsatisfying.

While some fans can exercise their creative agency and create fan fiction that addresses their concerns (e.g., rectify unsatisfactory gender identity representations), Gray (2019) explained that others will continue passively consuming the canonic media content despite their reservations and resistance. These media users engage in what Gray called "disappointed anti-fandom". It involves "hopeful hatewatching" wherein individuals consume media content in the hopes that it gets better. In particular, Gray suggested that disappointed anti-fandom and hopeful hatewatching are likely to occur among members of marginalized groups who do not see many affirming representations of their group in mainstream media. Thus, they may feel compelled to watch underwhelming or even offensive media characters, even though they find the representation of their group to be disappointing.

Martin's (2019) interviews with Black women who were critical of Tyler Perry's films but continued to watch them to maintain ties with family and friends who enjoyed them provides an interesting case. These interviewees did not find Tyler's representations of Black women to be thoughtfully developed or uplifting, yet they felt compelled to support Black producers like Perry to prove to the mainstream media industry that there is a market for Hollywood films directed at Black audiences. As one informant explained to Martin: "You gotta go see the Tyler Perry movie, the brother is doing his thing. You gotta go do that, you gotta support him" (cited in Martin, 2019, p. 179).

At times, media users engage in ambivalent, complex PSRs with characters that they like but also criticize. For example, Gray (2021) interviewed self-identified feminists who felt guilty or like "bad allies" for continuing to watch TV shows they enjoyed but whose representations failed to be intersectional and thus contradicted their feminist politics. Gray argued that these audience members' continued interest in these programs, sometimes expressed more as ambivalence than dislike, is a privilege of Whiteness that marginalized viewers do not possess. Alternately, Gray pondered whether cultural messages about gender played a role in these female audience members' continued viewing of these shows; he described that their responses "might indicate the degree to which women have often been encouraged not to dislike or at least not to full-throatedly share their dislikes" (pp. 103–104). Noting the ways that like and dislike intertwine in audiences' experiences of media that fail to meet their expectations, Gray (2021) insisted that "we as analysts might be wise to extend discussions of fandom and dislike into each other, rather than treating them as distinct" (p. 98).

McCullough (2019) demonstrated the overlapping nature of fandom and dislike in the context of football fandom. He described "fantipathy" as a situation in which loyal fans direct their frustration toward *their own team*. The moments of exasperation, anger, and dissatisfaction with one's own team in times of heightened competition, McCullough asserted, help fans navigate feelings of failure and loss, build and deepen bonds with other fans, and demonstrate cultural knowledge about the team and the sport. In this way, McCullough highlighted that sometimes anti-fandom can be directed at one's own team as well as at an opposing team: "Criticism of one's own team is not merely tolerated but often actively encouraged" (p. 228). For some, fantipathy does not dominate the overall loving relationship and would correspond to a lovers' quarrel or a discord within a friendship rather than an NPSR that is based on dislike. However, for others, this fantipathy is a defining characteristic of their PSR, rendering it a deeply ambivalent blend of like and dislike.

Through his interviews with disappointed fans Gray (2021) examined the high hopes some marginalized fans have about media that would ultimately let them down. Frustrations with representations of queer characters, Black women, and characters with disabilities loom large in Gray's analysis, and he concluded that "dislike is regularly born when a popular text lures us into thinking it will challenge the status quo, doing something better and different, going somewhere better, only to fail" (p. 99).

Investment. Relational investment and prior relational satisfaction comprise the second reason that interpersonal research (Rusbult et al., 1986) identified for engaging in positive (loyal) relationships instead of employing a destructive (exit) strategy. Specifically, Rusbult et al. suggested that individuals will be more likely to preserve currently unsatisfying relationships because they used to be satisfying and because of the contributions that they have already made to the relationships. Contrary to Horton and Wohl's (1956) implied assumption that individuals can easily or would willingly exit unfulfilling PSRs, there is ample evidence to the contrary. PSBs are emotionally costly (see Chapter 6), and some media users can go to great lengths to avoid termination of a PSR (e.g., Tukachinsky Forster & Downey, 2022).

Baym's (2000) participant observation of soap fans on the rec.arts.tv.soaps online newsgroup is a strong example of this kind of loyalty to a media text. U.S. soap operas, which aired year-round, 5 days a week, unfolding over multiple decades, are composed of many overlapping and concurrently advancing storylines with numerous characters. Baym described that long-term soap opera fans continued to watch their favorite programs not because of their persistent love of them, but "despite the faults" (p. 104). To sustain their interest despite their intermittent dissatisfaction, they commonly fast-forwarded through recordings of storylines they did not enjoy. This strategy demonstrates that even when one storyline was disappointing, others sustained their interest. Additionally, Baym noted that sharing their disappointments with others in the fan community helped to alleviate fans' negative feelings, enabling them to continue watching. This also means that viewers have

to tolerate (or fast-forward through) unsatisfying PSRs with characters they disliked to maintain their interest in the show.

Loyalty can also be exercised when individuals feel compelled to finish watching a season (or seasons) of a television show they no longer enjoy because they feel that they have already invested a lot into watching it thus far. Indeed, Steiner and Xu (2020) reported that some media users explain their binge-watching behavior by an acute urge to complete the show and a sense of relief when they finish watching it. Thus, even if the show deteriorates and is no longer enjoyable, acting on a sunk-cost fallacy, some viewers may feel compelled to continue watching this show. By so doing, the viewers lock themselves in strained NPSRs with the characters that populate this show. This type of loyalty, encompassing more habit-motivated media consumption, is perhaps even more passive and involves less emotional investment than hopeful watching.

There is, however, a limit to how much loyalty can be stretched. As issues continue to mount, the strain on the PSR can become too much to tolerate, and even loyal fans welcome the end of the relationship. For instance, Williams (2019) examined U.S. viewers of the TV series *West Wing* and found that loyal, long-term fans expressed relief instead of loss when the show was canceled in 2006. Their relief was directly tied to frustration with the changes in the series they attributed to executive producer John Wells, who took over for Aaron Sorkin in Season 4, after which the series' ratings began to decline. Specifically, fans were disappointed with Wells's emphasis on newer characters and storylines over beloved, fan favorites, and also with his focus on more sensational plotlines instead of the nuanced narratives for which the series had come to be known. Williams posited that fans' relieved reactions allowed fans "to protect themselves and to attempt to ward off any emotional upset when the show ends as they rationalize their affective ties away via the suggestion that the show had ceased to be worthy of their attention" (pp. 232–324). Williams' work demonstrates that fans' relationships with beloved media change over time, and that we should focus more on what shapes these changes take to "allow greater understanding of how fans' relationships with fan objects ebb and flow across the lifespan of the fan object and, in many cases, of the fans themselves" (p. 330).

Ludic and Ironic PSRs

Contrary to loyalty that can be viewed as an unsatisfying or even frustrating PSE, some NPSRs can be experienced as an entertaining and desirable form of PSE. The pleasure that media users can derive from NPSRs can be akin to the thrill that some individuals enjoy in a ludic relationship style. A ludic love style (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986) is based on what could be viewed by others as dysfunctional relational dynamics such as manipulation, deception, and low commitment. In the parasocial context, a ludic relationship style can take the form of a playful "love-to-hate" relationship with media personalities. For example, Murumaa-Mengel and Siibak's (2020) anti-fandom research showed that

some media users enjoy flaming—posting insulting or provoking comments in search for "YouTube drama."

Ang (1985) likewise demonstrated that some media users may actively cultivate their contempt-based PSR for pleasure. In her study of letters written by regular viewers of the U.S. drama *Dallas*, Ang (1985) found that some made contradictory statements in their reflections on the show. She described the "ironic stance" these disdaining viewers adopted as sustained by the pleasure they received from the mocking commentary they produced about it. She explained: "Apparently these letter writers don't enjoy *Dallas* itself at all, what they seem to enjoy is the irony they bring to bear on it" (p. 97). Enjoyment in this case stems specifically from the "badness" of the media content.

McCoy and Scarborough (2014) explored three viewing styles that exhibit contradictory engagements with media: ironic consumption, camp sensibility, and guilty pleasures. Audience members who employed the ironic and camp viewing styles displayed love-to-hate relationships with, for example, reality shows and soap operas, describing the media content to be "so bad it is good." Demonstrating how pleasure is derived from NPSRs, one interviewee proclaimed: "The people on that show are such idiots; they are hilarious!" (p. 48). McCoy and Scarborough (2014) suggested that the ironic viewing style in particular is based on disdain that validates one's identity by affirming media users' superiority, values, and belief system. In this case, the media consumer engages in a downward social comparison with the media personality or expresses moral opposition to what the media personality represents (e.g., hypersexuality, vanity and materialism, low intellect, lack of style, political position, etc.). Their work also cautioned that NPSRs may not always be genuine because audiences may express ironic NPSRs to conceal their positive PSRs and save face. It may be hard for media users to openly admit having a positive PSR with a media personality that the cultural hierarchy of taste or social norms deem to be "trashy" or "bad." Thus, some viewers of "inferior" genres such as soap operas and reality shows report feeling guilty about enjoying something they believe that they ought not to be consuming.

Gilbert (2019) explored different forms of the practice "hatewatching," a form of TV viewing that is uncomfortable but also offers pleasures. She asserted that the hatewatching viewer believes the text itself is not enjoyable; instead, the viewer finds pleasure "because of the entertainment it offers through chronicling and categorizing its badness" (p. 72). Further, Gilbert suggested that the irony and sarcasm at the core of hatewatching help to demonstrate how it is a social practice designed to establish or maintain membership in a community of like-minded viewers. Hatewatching, then, is an orientation grounded in the denigration of a media text or figure to demonstrate one's dominant viewpoint and is performed "by individuals seeking to situate themselves as a discrete, and assumedly superior, subgroup of pop culture consumers" (Gilbert, 2019, p. 77).

Gray (2021) also wrote about the ludic and ironic pleasures of dislike and described statements of such dislike as “the poetry of putrescence.” He suggested that putrescent statements, commonly found, for instance, in professional critics’ reviews, are rooted in dislike and “communicate joy and pleasure, or at least contain a poetry to them that may allow the hearer to enjoy the statement” (p. 177). Such poetry, Gray argued, can be an attempt by the viewer to release the tension built up by dislike or a rhetorical strategy designed in part to encourage the spread of dislike. The poetry of putrescence is also a strategy for combatting texts that are seen as ubiquitous or inescapable; in these situations, viewers understand that “one small way to fight back is to limit their power both by finding joy in one’s dislike and by communicating their ills in extravagant, poetic fashion” (Gray, 2021, p. 182).

While fandom research has examined hatewatching behaviors in general, it may be that these behaviors are driven by dislike for particular media characters that appear in these shows. In other words, it could be the NPSR with the Kardashian family members on the reality show *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* or the animosity toward the character of Francis Underwood in the drama *House of Cards* that drive the hatewatching of these shows.

Antecedents and Consequences of NPSRs

The typology of NPSRs outlined above is strictly theoretical. There is a grave need for empirically establishing these (or other) types of NPSRs. Yet with some possible types outlined, a fruitful next step involves developing appropriate measures that capture these different relational experiences, understanding how they manifest, and examining how various NPSEs relate to other variables. Predictors can encompass media user-level, message-level, and relationship-level variables.

Individual Differences

Several personality traits could predispose some individuals to develop NPSRs. There is overall relatively little research on personality and PSRs. However, NPSRs can be associated with narcissism, Machiavellism, and psychopathy. These personality traits, collectively dubbed the *dark triad*, represent individuals who tend to have a grandiose sense of self-importance, are manipulative, and lack empathy. These characteristics color individuals’ perceptions of others and relationships. Thus, individuals with a ludic love style tend to score higher on these dark triad traits (e.g., Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010). It is logical to assume that as these personality characteristics govern interpersonal relationships, they have similar implications for PSEs. Recent research examined the role of these personality traits in increasing viewers’ PSRs overall (Liebers & Schramm, 2021) and an inclination to relate to characters that are villains rather than heroes (Brodie & Ingram, 2021). Building on these findings, it is also logical to assume that people who score high on the dark triad would also be more cynical in their PSRs and enjoy ludic PSRs.

Indirect support for this assertion came from Bernhold (2019), who examined the role of attachment style in PSRs (see an in-depth discussion of attachment and its relationship to PSRs in Chapters 9 and 10 in this volume). Bernhold found that intensity of the NPSR (operationalized as antipathy) that viewers experienced with their disliked media figures was associated with depressive symptoms and loneliness, particularly among individuals with lower avoidance attachment and poor romantic relationships. Conversely, Bernhold suggested that individuals who score higher on avoidance attachment can use NPSRs to shield themselves from the negative consequences (i.e., depression and loneliness) of relational difficulties.

Bernhold (2019) reasoned that individuals high on relationship avoidance have a different model of relationships. Rather than seeking warmth and intimacy in their relationships, some of these individuals thrive on hostile and combative relationships. Thus, while such patterns may be dysfunctional or even turn abusive in real-life relationships, such NPSRs may be particularly enjoyable and appealing to avoidant adults in poor-quality relationships.

Media users' *group identity* can also play an important role in developing PSRs with "trashy" and "stupid" media personalities. First, we hypothesize that for members of a marginalized group, group identity strength is expected to predict NPSRs with ingroup characters (loyal NPSRs). As discussed in Chapters 13 and 18, research should give a much more nuanced consideration to how marginalized social identities (e.g., racial/ethnic, sexual, etc.) play a role in PSEs. It is suggested here that members of marginalized groups have a greater propensity for disappointed hatewatching out of a sense of obligation to maintain a PSR, even if negative, with the scarce media representations of their group. The consequences of these experiences for personal and group identity would be a next frontier for NPSR research.

From an intergroup perspective, positive PSRs with outgroup members can promote more harmonious intergroup relationships (see Chapter 12). On the flip side, NPSRs with an outgroup character could have the opposite effect. Past research showed that negative mediated intergroup contact fostered prejudice (see the meta-analysis by Banas et al., 2020). However, these studies do not measure NPSRs directly. Perhaps, some individuals who are prejudiced against these groups would seek to confirm their negative disposition through selective exposure to what they would consider trashy media featuring "ridiculous" or "stupid" outgroup characters. The NPSR with such despicable outgroup characters can enhance their sense of superiority, providing group-enhancing social comparison. Thus, identity-related variables (group identity strength, pride, collective shame, and guilt, a priori prejudice, and stereotypes) can be important in considering both loyal NPSRs (for audiences with a marginalized group identity) and competitive, ludic, and cynical PSRs (for dominant group audiences seeking to disparage the outgroup).

In addition to group identity, on a personal identity level, NPSRs can reinforce one's value system (through competitive and cynical PSRs) as it involves downward comparisons

and ridiculing the media figure, thereby affirming one's own value system and moral superiority. Therefore, psychological variables germane to the process of self-affirmation would be particularly important to explore in the context of NPSRs.

Relational Variables

Drawing from interpersonal models of relationships, NPSRs can be related to investment and relationship alternatives. Many media users who have already made a substantial investment in the PSR or feel that there are few alternatives to their existing PSR will be more likely to maintain a NPSR than to undergo a PSB. Building on Eyal and Dailey's (2012) and Adam and Sizemore's (2013) work, future studies can examine how these social exchange theory variables contribute to loyal NPSRs in the face of disappointment from media content.

Media Message Variables

Media message features and characteristics of media personalities can facilitate NPSRs. These include, for example, morality (villains vs. heroes) and popularity (forcing media users to form inescapable PSRs of some sort). Some media figures may strategically brand themselves as provocative and controversial. This marketing approach intended to provoke a strong response—either support or condemnation—is common among music artists from Madonna in the 1980s to Miley Cyrus in the 2000s. These media figures therefore invite value-loaded responses, welcome NPSRs, seemingly thriving on anti-fandom as much as they do on fandom.

Finally, PSRs are situated within a broader social context (see Chapter 10). Just as much as fan communities provide media users an opportunity to relate, so does anti-fandom. Through engagement in anti-fandom media users can relate with other like-minded individuals creating an echo chamber of opposition to a particular popular culture text, in this case a character or celebrity. Research examining anti-fan communities can ascertain the role of individual and group identity gratifications (e.g., need to belong, self-affirmation needs) as the driving forces behind NPSRs.

Persuasion and Media Effects

Parasocial experiences can play a crucial role in persuasion and media effects, from celebrity endorsement in marketing, to modeling health behaviors, and to social advocacy promoting political causes (see Chapters 16, 14, and 15, respectively, for review). However, these effects have only been examined in the context of positive PSRs. What could the consequences of negative ones be? A recent study by Cohen et al. (2021) offered a hint, demonstrating that hate-watching a reality show is negatively associated with the beneficial effects of exposure to health information featured in that program. While the study did not specifically measure PSRs or other forms of involvement with any of the characters on the show, it is logical to assume that hatewatching this program (*Keeping Up*

With the Kardashians) entails some sort of NPSRs with at least one of the show's central characters. Accordingly, it would be logical to hypothesize that NPSRs can hinder the effect of celebrities even when they stand for socially desirable issues. Similarly, mediated contact with media figures that represent the viewers' outgroup (see Chapter 12) will not be effective if the viewers engage in a NPSR with that outgroup character. But while NPSRs should jeopardize positive effects based on modeling desirable behaviors, it would be interesting to examine the extent to which NPSRs can also be leveraged to promote prosocial outcomes. For instance, do NPSRs promote inhibition effects when media figures are cast as negative role models?

Conclusions

This chapter reviewed parasocial and fan and media studies scholarship to make a first step toward a thorough theorization of the PSEs that media users have with disliked characters and to offer a blueprint for future research in this relatively poorly understood area of PSRs. While media and fan studies scholars have explored the complexity of fans' relationships with media texts, characters, and personalities (including negative experiences and relationships), PSR researchers have typically examined negative experience as a monolithic construct. Consider Bernhold's (2019, p. 555) instructions to study participants: "We are now interested in learning about your least favorite character. For the purposes of this study, your least favorite character can be defined as whichever character on television you dislike the most." This language demonstrates the pervasive classification of media figures into a generic "disliked"/"least favorite" category by PSR researchers. However, by exploring media and fan studies scholarship alongside parasocial scholarship, we can see that this is an oversimplification that overlooks the multitude of ways in which characters can be disliked. For instance, a passive acceptance of a disliked character to enjoy an otherwise loved television show is not the same experience as feeling offended by a popular television character that embodies a grotesque stereotype of one's racial or ethnic group. And both experiences are distinct from declaring disdain toward a trashy reality TV personality and passionately consuming that disparaged content to reaffirm one's own superiority through vocal downward social comparisons. These are just several different non-amicable PSRs that we covered in this chapter.

While usually distinct with little overlap, we argued there is much to be gained by PSEs and media and fan studies scholars joining forces and collaborating. As mentioned, media effects and PSEs scholars almost exclusively consider friendly encounters with liked media figures that evoke predominantly positive affective and cognitive responses. However, as we have demonstrated, media and fan studies scholarship has long examined audiences' complex relationships with media they both love and hate. There are few quantitative studies speaking to the pervasiveness of these experiences, but there is rich, recent, qualitative scholarship that focuses directly on hate, dislike, and anti-fandom, revealing how profound and consequential these experiences can be. Yet, there remains much to be

done, and we agreed with Gray (2021, p. 11) that scholars should explore audiences' negative emotions, experiences, and relationships with media as "not simply and only a subset of fandom." Instead, we must "construct an account of what dislike is, what it means, how it works, what it tells us, how it matters, and thus how it should change and nuance our understanding of audiences and of their interactions with media" (Gray, 2021, p. 4).

Building on this, we argued that NPSRs vary not merely as an inverse image of amicable PSRs that can be captured by low scores on a positive PSR scale. Nor do they represent merely varying degrees of antipathy. Rather, in our opinion they constitute qualitatively different, unique psychological experiences that deserve a far more nuanced theorization (which we hoped to lay the foundations for here) and empirical investigation (which we hope to see more of in the near future). Moreover, further conceptualization of NPSRs can go beyond "positive" and "negative" to recognize the complex nature of PSRs that are often ambivalent and encompass both like and dislike, devotion and criticism. We argued that "amicable" and "negative" PSRs can at times be intertwined, and that one can also develop where the other had previously been. Thus, PSR scholarship should be open to a more diverse and nuanced conceptualization (and measurement) of PSRs to encompass the full gamut and richness of these PSEs.

Note

1. Animosity toward the rival team that constitutes a NPSR is not to be confused with relational challenges within a generally positive PSR with one's liked media figure or with ambivalent PSRs (e.g., such as "fantipathy"). We discuss fantipathy further in this chapter, in the section on loyal/passive NPSRs.

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CHAPTER

18

Parasocial Experiences as a Function of Racial and Ethnic Identity

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Abstract

The chapter discusses how individuals experience parasocial ties with ingroup and outgroup characters based on race and ethnicity. Engagement in parasocial experiences is associated with a number of identity implications, rendering them critical to how people use media messages to understand themselves. However, much of the research within the social sciences, and communication in particular, has tended to occur within Western, often United States centered, contexts, notably among respondents disproportionately associated with the White racial identity, specifically those of a European ethnic descent. The chapter specifically examines members of marginalized groups and focuses on racial and ethnic identities. Much research remains needed in this area; however, adjacent research and theoretical applications are both incorporated in order to speculate about parasocial experiences that are contextualized by race and ethnicity. The significance of these experiences for media users' ethnic/racial identities and directions for future research are discussed.

Key Words: social identity, race, ethnicity, social identity gratifications, self-concept, intergroup relationships, diversity

Introduction

Engagement in parasocial experiences (PSEs) is associated with a number of identity implications, rendering them critical to how people use media messages to understand themselves. However, much of the research within the social sciences and communication, in particular, has tended to occur within Western, often United States centered, contexts (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Cheon et al., 2020), notably among respondents disproportionately associated with the White racial identity, specifically those of a European ethnic descent. Research examining PSEs (e.g., parasocial interactions [PSIs], parasocial relationships [PSRs], etc.) has correspondingly been dominated by a lack of diverse perspectives within investigations that aim to make broad claims about media users. For example, follow-up analyses (Tukachinsky, personal communication, March 14, 2022) of Tukachinsky et al.'s (2020) meta-analysis data set revealed that of 224 studies that measured parasocial phenomena, 139 were conducted within the United States. Of those

studies conducted within the United States, only 82 studies reported the racial/ethnic composition of their sample. The average percentage of White respondents in these studies was 71%, well exceeding the proportion of this identity represented in census data (i.e., 57.8%; Jin et al., 2021). No other racial or ethnic groups participating in this research exceeded 10% representation, on average. Moreover, only one study focused exclusively on a non-White sample—in this case, Black respondents—in its assessment of PSEs.

The aforementioned empirical evidence overwhelmingly suggests that research pertaining to ties media users form with media figures has much work to do in terms of drawing inclusive conclusions related to race and ethnicity. Mediated communication and media psychology researchers have increasingly concluded that evidence acquired in this fashion could be facilitating relatively myopic and shortsighted understandings of broader *human* phenomena (e.g., Ramasubramanian & Banjo, 2020). In the domain of PSEs, relying on narrow contexts for drawing conclusions may fail to acknowledge that diverse individuals, who vary in terms of particularly salient racial and ethnic minority identities, may experience interactions and relationships with media figures in ways that differ from the ethnic majority due to divergent personal or cultural lived experiences (Riles et al., in press).

In this chapter, we discuss research related to PSEs as they pertain to racial/ethnic identity (REI), notably with regard to those associated with marginalized groups. We use the social identity designation of REI because, as articulated in prior research examining race and ethnicity (Riles, Varava, et al., 2018, p. 303):

> Although we recognize that "race" and "ethnicity" are distinct concepts (derived from physical/biological factors and culture, respectively), comparing groups along a single dimension is common, as is the somewhat simultaneous usage of these terms (e.g., Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Grosfoguel (2004) argues that the terms' practical usage features a persistent conceptual intermingling of meanings, which scholars would be ill-advised to combat. . . . Therefore, Grosfoguel (2004) suggests using these classifications together in the manner in which they are commonly understood: racial/ethnic identity (REI).

A review of the literature establishing how various REIs—especially minority REIs—may predict particular manifestations of PSEs reveals that such work is scant in the extreme. In the present context, minority REIs refer to those individuals associated with an ethnic or racial minority status, such as non-White individuals in the United States. Though scholarship is lacking regarding REI influences on PSEs, it remains necessary to acknowledge that which is available, even if adjacently so, as well as what prevailing theory would suggest could be anticipated patterns related to the experience of parasocial phenomena as a function of the REI of media users in conjunction with the REI of media figures. Where research regarding the role of REI in various PSEs is lacking, we speculate the types of patterns that may be anticipated, relying on applicable theoretical

frameworks, and conclude by suggesting avenues for future research. An examination of these potential and observed REI-based parasocial patterns as they relate to the intensity of perceived PSEs, selective exposure motivations based on anticipated PSEs, and the outcome influences of PSEs afford opportunities for scholars to navigate this fertile research landscape. Ideally, this chapter will encourage media scholars to more deliberately consider the role that salient REIs play in the formation and functioning of the multitude of our mediated ties.

Intensity of PSEs as a Function of Racial/Ethnic Identity

An individual's REI could be expected to play a prominent role in the formation and experience of parasocial ties. Scholars continually find support for the notion that homophily and perceived similarity are ardent predictors of PSEs (e.g., Turner, 1993). One explanation for such an outcome may be that PSEs appear to often serve as opportunities for individuals to think about themselves via the contemplation of the situation of a perceived similar other (Riles & Adams, 2020). The more others, in this context mediated others, align on a salient identity feature, the more applicable their experiences and encounters are to considerations of the self. REI homophily would conceivably represent a salient identity feature where alignment could predict immersion into particular PSEs.

REI and the Experience of Parasocial Interactions

Evidence has long indicated that when respondents reported perceiving a greater general homophily toward characters with whom they encountered, they also indicated more intense experiences of interactions with those characters (e.g., Eyal & Rubin, 2003). In the domain of REI homophily, a few studies speak to the capacity of REI alignment to influence the intensity of PSIs experienced. For example, Turner (1993) observed that perceived appearance and background homophily were significant predictors of PSI intensity with a range of media figure types, including soap opera characters (for appearance homophily), comedians (for background homophily), and newscasters (for both). Similarly, Pan and Zeng (2018) found that PSIs with major athletes (Kobe Bryant or Jeremy Lin, two professional basketball players at the time of the study) were predicated on the REI alignment of the media users and athletes. The experiment revealed that media users who identified as Black or Asian experienced more intense PSIs with an athlete that matched their REIs.

The aforementioned studies represent rare empirical examinations of how potential REI considerations could influence the perceived magnitude of the illusory conversational give and take that is PSI. Naturally, it should not be taken to suggest that PSIs are not likely with someone of divergent REIs, or that such identity alignments would be uniformly predictive of the magnitude of PSI experiences. Indeed, Hu and colleagues (2019) demonstrated a notable construct that conceivably would serve to attenuate this phenomenon. Though focused on national identity rather than REI, these researchers revealed the

capacity for cultural identity internalization, or ethnocentrism, to moderate the degree to which PSI intensity may fluctuate as a function of REI alignments. They observed that American students who ranked higher on ethnocentrism experienced stronger PSIs with an American sitcom character than a British character when they ranked higher on ethnocentrism. Conversely, those who rated relatively lower on ethnocentrism experienced greater PSI with the British sitcom character, rather than the American character.

Worth consideration is an explanation for why such patterns related to PSI and REI may be observed. Conceptually, the tendency to orient greater effort and involvement to interactions with those that one views as similar can, as mentioned, be understood in terms of homophily. Researchers have long suggested that perceiving someone else as similar to oneself increases perceived familiarity with said individual and trust that the interactions will yield greater benefits and contain fewer barriers to optimal social outcomes (Aube & Koestner, 1995). Such perceptual inclinations are argued to hold true for parasocial and interpersonal relationships (Turner, 1993). The perception that interactions with dissimilar others could be associated with greater costs (e.g., unease, conflict) than benefits (e.g., connection, trust) is at the core of explications of intergroup anxiety.

Intergroup anxiety—or stress-related perceptions of uneasiness and threat regarding a particular outgroup—is often at the root of relatively antisocial affective orientations toward social groups (Stevenson et al., 2020). This uneasiness may not solely stem from viewing others as an explicit threat but may arise due to perceptions that intergroup engagement may not occur in an expected fashion with anticipated optimal outcomes (e.g., understanding one another, peer validation, etc.). In this way, PSIs with outgroup REI members would seem to be contending with the same social exchange considerations that apply to interpersonal interactions. Specifically, social exchange theory suggests that individuals are particularly prone to invest in engagement in situations in which dividends for the interaction are maximized (Osborn, 2012). Individuals may invest more in social situations from which they can expect more desirable experiences and outcomes. The notion that decreased intergroup anxiety and greater self-discovery may be possible with one REI relative to another, even if unconsciously perceived, could serve to explain why PSIs with same-REI others could be experienced with greater intensity.

REI and the Experience of Parasocial Relationships

In addition to considering how REI perceptions and alignments may be attenuating the magnitude of PSI experiences, there is value to exploring what research and theory inform scholars regarding the longer term PSE of a parasocial relationship (PSR). Similar to the research that explores the role that REIs of media users and media figures play in the experience of a PSI, the research examining REI in the context of PSR is virtually nonexistent. One exception pertains to an investigation of reported PSRs with the fictional character, Harry Potter, as a function of whether participants resided in Germany or Mexico. In this study, Schmid and Klimmt (2011) observed that participants in the Mexican subsample

indicated a significantly greater PSR with Harry Potter than those in the German subsample. However, other variables that are viewed as antecedents of PSRs (e.g., attraction, homophily) were largely comparable in both samples. Though neither subsample technically shared a national identity with the British Harry Potter, it can be observed that the participants who were arguably closer to this protagonist in terms of REI were those who experienced the PSR to a lesser degree. This finding may be understood as going against general expectations regarding similar-REI others, but it is worth noting that Britain and Germany—while both European and commonly associated racially with being predominantly White—have a long history of conflict (as well as coordination) that may have influenced observed patterns. As such, additional research regarding PSRs and REI alignment, in general, is warranted, as are studies that can more clearly reveal if, how, and why particular REIs are prone to form stronger PSRs with other REIs.

Nevertheless, there are empirically established patterns utilizing constructs adjacent to PSRs which could inform scholars' expectations. Although conceptually and operationally distinct from a PSR, identification and fandom are described as additional forms that mediated relationships with media figures can take (Cohen, 2014). This research, as it pertains to REI, may yield scholarly insight. For example, in one study examining how REI and exposure to body types could influence the body image of those of different REI backgrounds, David and colleagues (2002) observed that Black, though not White, respondents were the ones who experienced greater identification with the exhibited same-REI media figures. Such evidence suggests that race and ethnicity are not uniformly salient social identities for all. Indeed, the argument that particular social identities are least salient for those associated with the hegemonic majority classification within that identity has been promoted in other scholarly work (e.g., Riles et al., in press). The observation by David and colleagues (2002) lends credence to these arguments and suggests that racial and ethnic minorities could experience PSRs that are contextualized by similar REIs with a greater intensity than their White counterparts. Indeed, Saleem and colleagues (2019) noted that in America, Muslims—a routinely stigmatized religious identity often conceived as a minority ethnic identity—did not demonstrate reduced identification ties even in the context of exposure to negative coverage of ingroup members. For minorities, due to reduced instances of seeing ingroup REI members (e.g., Riles, Varava, et al., 2018), the mediated relationships formed may be more critical to self-concept maintenance, and these relationships may be expected to form with greater intensity and durability.

From a conceptual standpoint, there may be a number of scholarly explanations for why REI minorities would be expected to experience PSRs with a greater intensity relative to media user counterparts who are White. Social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1979) posits that perceived ingroup members are routinely favored over perceived outgroup members and often accorded greater trust and social investment resources. Discerning characteristic attribute alignments with those in one's social environment serves the function of facilitating the ability to reinforce one's own self-worth and esteem through similar

others. For example, in the domain of fandom-mediated relationships (Cohen, 2014), Banjo and Williams (2014) conducted focus groups to explore how Black and White fans of Christian music evaluated the genre when performed by members of the other's racial background (e.g., Gospel music and contemporary Christian music, respectively). Lending support to SIT, as it relates to fandom, the researchers observed favoritism for the racially congruent Christian music while also demonstrating disparagement of their racial counterparts' Christian music, despite similarities in themes. The authors argued that sociocultural and marketing factors were at play that relied on social identity-based inclinations.

The influence of one's REI on preferential inclinations toward ingroup others is contingent on the salience of that social identity relative to others (e.g., Stets & Burke, 2000). When a particular social identity is relatively more accessible to someone, it plays a more impactful role in judgments and decision-making as those identities are the ones that will be most notably favored. As previously indicated, some evidence suggests that Black people, and other REI minorities, tend to form stronger mediated relationships with racially and ethnically corresponding others when compared to White individuals (e.g., David et al., 2002). For example, Black respondents have been observed to spend more time browsing news websites that were perceived as produced for Black audiences and feature stories about Black individuals (Appiah, 2003), where White respondents did not exhibit the same REI-congruence patterns. Knobloch-Westerwick (2015) remarked on such disparate identity-influenced patterns, suggesting this is "likely because [Black] group membership is more salient to them due to their minority status" (p. 972–973). The suggestion that minority identities may be relatively more salient than majority identities, due to increasingly prevalent experiences of otherness, would seem to explain why there could be lopsided experiences of intensity with regard to PSRs that manifest due to REI congruence with the media figure. As such, research that examines the experience of mediated relationships that are constituted in this manner (e.g., David et al, 2002; Schmid & Klimmt, 2011), though scant, may need to more concertedly consider the role of REI internalization (e.g., Hu et al., 2019; Riles et al., in press). Otherwise, the conceivably problematic operating assumption, that REI is the predominantly salient social identity for all people, will influence research design and interpretation in ways that presumably strike at the validity of this research.

REI and Parasocial Breakup

As discussed in Chapter 6, individuals might encounter challenges to their PSRs, for example, when their beloved media figure misbehaves or morally transgresses. While termination of PSRs (i.e., parasocial breakup; Eyal & Cohen, 2006) is never easy, a transgression of a minority REI media figure can present unique challenges. In one study (Brown et al., 2016), when confronted with a transgression by a media figure (e.g., an arrest for violent criminality), race was observed to play a role in the effectiveness of the image

repair process. Specifically, image repair efforts (e.g., apologizing, downplaying severity of incident) were less effective in restoring the image and regaining support for White (vs. minority REI) perpetrators. Though the sample in this study was predominantly White (62.8%), its composition of particular other REIs (i.e., Black respondents) was proportionally pronounced (i.e., 23.7%) relative to societal representation. As such, reconciling transgressions by minority REIs may be more readily achieved for most individuals, relative to nonminority REI media figures, but there is reason to believe that members of marginalized racial and ethnic groups are particularly likely to uphold their PSRs (Gray, 2019) because their REIs may be relatively more internalized than the REI of individuals of European descent (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015). Moreover, PSRs with marginalized REI media personalities are increasingly scarce, offering fewer opportunities for the experience of positive distinctiveness and enhanced self-worth from these representations.

Conceptually related to SIT, research on the fundamental attribution bias (e.g., Krull et al., 1999) suggests ingroup favoritism can take the form of assigning situational attributes (i.e., the circumstances are culpable) to negative behaviors committed by ingroups and dispositional attributes (i.e., the person is culpable) to the same behaviors committed by outgroups. Such an explanation may reveal insights into situations in which potentially problematic behavioral descriptions of an ingroup do not result in a pronounced reduction in the perceived intensity of the mediated relationship (e.g., Saleem et al., 2019). For Black people, for example, some media figures have landed in the criminal justice system for alleged egregious acts (e.g., Michael Jackson, O. J. Simpson, R. Kelly), and yet, they have maintained some degree of support and investment, often notably from Black audiences.

Bill Cosby, for example, is associated with decades worth of alleged sexual assaults enacted on dozens of women. While many Black audiences, who grew up with Cosby as a personal or professional role model, may not excuse such criminality, they will often also describe the devastating loss of cultural legacy as being a reason why they have, and continue to, nevertheless, feel connected to their perception of Cosby (e.g., Zinoman, 2017). In a landscape with relatively fewer representations allowing for REI pride and identification, Bill Cosby was a source of these self-perceptions in a manner so centralized that complete dissolution of that tie may deleteriously influence Black audiences' construction of their personal identity and self-esteem.

Similar processes may occur in the context of PSR with fictional minority REI characters in mainstream media. Even when minority REIs are represented, they may be disproportionately associated with negative circumstances, which could serve to inoculate or desensitize same-REI media users, leading them to compartmentalize those characteristics. The relatively limited REI-congruent role models for minorities, compared to majority groups, may be facilitating circumstances in which ambiguous or uncertain transgressions can be downplayed. Gray (2019) described the maintenance of PSEs under these conditions as "hopeful hate-watching." In these situations, individuals, notably marginalized

groups, may maintain the mediated relationship in hopes that negative attribute associations are tenuous, improperly assigned, or will be quickly overcome (see Chapter 17).

Media Selectivity, PSEs, and Racial/Ethnic Identity

The parasocial ties experienced during media engagement often serve as the primary reason that many media users engage in the use of media. There is a rich history of academic literature that describes the encountering, and anticipation, of PSEs as a notable antecedent to selective exposure tendencies. Much of the early research in this domain applied Horton and Wohl's (1956) PSI concept to a burgeoning uses-and-gratifications framework (McQuail et al., 1972). In this conceptualization, PSIs, and eventually PSRs, are argued to serve as motivating forces pushing media users to choose certain messages featuring a particular media figure over other messages that do not (Ruggiero, 2000). In the time since these earliest explications of selectivity motivations for PSEs, a number of additional models have been developed that hold increasing value to better understanding the specific traits that media users must perceive themselves and relevant media figures to hold in order to precipitate the seeking, or avoidance, of particular messages. The following sections explore several of the more prominent conceptual frameworks utilized to explain motivations to seek PSIs and PSRs with ingroup REI media personae. Subsequently, motivations for seeking REI outgroups are considered.

Social Identity Gratifications

Perceptions of one's salient social identities have long been understood to influence a range of cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes that individuals will experience (Tajfel, 1979). In recognition of the central role that social identity perceptions could play in instigating specific patterns of media use, Harwood (1999) offered the social identity gratifications (SIG) extension to the uses-and-gratifications framework (Katz et al., 1973). The SIG approach suggests that, in essence, "individuals seek out particular media messages that support their social identities" (Abrams & Giles, 2007, p. 118). Though this phenomenon was not initially explicated with reference to, specifically, PSEs related to social identity, such an extension of SIG is readily apparent and associated with a degree of empirical support. For example, during the early 2000s, Auter and colleagues (2005) examined the nature of the appeal of the Al-Jazeera news network to Arab audiences. They found that this news outlet, initially developed with Middle Eastern and Arab audiences in mind, was most notably utilized by those reporting the strongest PSIs with the similar REI figures in the broadcast. In this instance, the intensity of PSEs was significantly related to the degree to which respondents sought out news from this outlet. Moreover, it was observed that those who currently resided in the Middle Eastern and Arabian geographical regions were those who experienced the strongest PSIs with the news media figures represented. As such, REI congruity was observed to be a notable predictor of specific outlet use, and PSI intensity revealed itself as a potential explanatory mechanism

for this pattern. Remaining physically rooted in the cultural community could foster an increasingly internalized sense of the given REI in this context. More recent evidence further suggests that enhanced internalization of REI (e.g., ethnocentrism) exacerbates the selectivity influences of perceived REI similarity (Schieferdecker & Wessler, 2017) akin to how this moderating factor was earlier mentioned to enhance the intensity of PSEs with REI ingroups (Hu et al., 2019).

Though not always explicitly invoking PSE motivations for media selectivity, several additional studies nevertheless provided potential evidence of the role of these types of experiences as they relate to SIG. Kharroub and Weaver (2019) demonstrated that those Arab media users who reported an increasingly intense identification with lead characters of a fictional Arab drama were also the ones who reported the greater desire to watch the program in the future. Though this identification was measured generally (i.e., not specifically with regard to REI), it does provide additional support for the broader notion of the role of identity as a key influence on whom media users will seek out during media engagement. In another study of Latin American media users, Sui (2021) observed that individuals who comparatively identified more with their Latin roots, relative to identifying as American, sought more culturally Latin news, television, and internet outlets. Once more, perceived identity serves to influence the patterns of ingroup media engagement.

Still, these studies are not to suggest that social identity will uniformly predict exposure patterns as a function of who is represented. Once more, available evidence suggests that REI minorities are more prone to SIG selectivity than the REI majority. For example, Knobloch-Westerwick and colleagues (2008) observed that, whether the depictions were negative or positive, Black news users indicated a heightened preference for news that depicts their REI, relative to White news users. Again, such a phenomenon likely pertains to variations in the salience of REI as a central social identity due to variations in the experience of societal REI hegemony. Taken together, there appears to be great utility in exploring how SIG-based selectivity is manifest in the PSEs of media users, notably those in the societal minority. However, this phenomenon, as it relates to parasocial ties, remains largely unexplored.

Self-Concept Maintenance

In addition to seeking messages supportive of salient social identities, individuals may also seek out media for the purposes of learning more about themselves, their capacities, and the types of efficacy they could expect navigating various experiential phenomena (Ruggiero, 2000). A self-concept, or the interconnected beliefs and attributional perceptions about one's own person (Johnson, 2017), is a somewhat malleable perception that is susceptible to both enhancement and devastation from exposure to relevant messages and mediated personae that are seen to reflect on the self. The selective exposure self and affect management (SESAM) model (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015) is a framework of media selectivity and effects that describes how identity and media use influence one another

transactionally. This framework is used to suggest that self-concept, in conjunction with additional affect considerations, predicts both media use motivations and selectivity, directly and indirectly, respectively. Selective exposure to messages that highlight elements of one's self-concept, then, influence an individual's self-concept in a recursive fashion.

When self-concept is made salient, individuals are motivated to seek out media that allows them to think of their self-concept in ways that are self-consistent, self-enhancing, and self-actualizing (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015). As it relates to REI, internalization of ethnicity (i.e., ethnocentrism) is associated with gains in the intensity of PSIs experienced (Hu et al., 2019) and tendencies to engage in REI-congruent selective exposure (Schieferdecker & Wessler, 2017). This is to say, as individuals view REI as increasingly central to their self-concept, this social identity increasingly leads them to select media with the aim of engaging with media figures who allow them opportunities to better understand themselves (Riles & Adams, 2020). As such, adherence to SESAM self-concept selectivity motivations and engagement in PSEs can both serve social comparison functions (Luong et al., 2019).

Members of REI minorities may pursue PSEs for the purpose of gaining insights about how others who align with their social identity navigate and encounter various social phenomena. These insights would be particularly valuable as they provide information regarding the normativity of various experiences and aspirations that REI minorities may hold. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) is a conceptual framework that documents the psychological processes through which individuals make use of social information in order to evaluate their own behavioral performances or to gain enhanced clarity regarding their own self-concept (Wills, 1981). Socially comparing one's self with ingroup members has been described as facilitating assimilation and identification motivations (Buunk & Ybema, 1997). Media—whether via engagement with (non)fictional characters or engagement with interpersonally known others via social media—are known to be rich locations for engagement in social comparison and self-concept maintenance. As such, individuals routinely choose content based on the perceived identity correspondence between themselves and key media figures (Johnson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2017).

Current evidence gives credence to the notion that REI congruity is a factor that influences how, and to what degree, social comparison processes affect media users' self-concept. For example, Frisby (2004) observed that exposure to idealized body images did not uniformly influence how Black women evaluated themselves. Prior evidence indicated that upward social comparisons related to body image were typically associated with increasingly harsh self-evaluations by message recipients. However, in Frisby's (2004) experiment, the effects of exposure to idealized body types on Black women's self-concept were notably present when they were exposed to other Black women. Together, these findings suggest that individuals maintain their identity through media use and do so by selectively engaging in mediated interactions.

Connecting With REI Outgroups

All the above was not to suggest that media users, in general, and REI minorities, in particular, would not have motivation to seek PSEs with REI outgroups. Indeed, according to the uses-and-gratifications theory, the surveillance function of media engagement is an essential media use motivation (e.g., Ruggiero, 2000). Accordingly, individuals may seek exposure to media depictions of REI outgroups for informational purposes, particularly if they believe that they lack direct experience with that outgroup. It has been suggested that most people do not have direct experience with the vast array of social and cultural outgroups in society and must, therefore, rely on media exposure for these experiences (Mutz & Goldman, 2010). If an individual is curious about the social and cultural experiences of outgroup REIs, they would conceivably be expected to sate this informational lacuna by exploring media messages that depict those ingroups in presumably authentic ways. This is to say, not all will be interested in obtaining insights about outgroups, only those potentially experiencing an uncertainty discrepancy (Afifi & Wiener, 2004) whereby the information possessed is less than the amount of information desired. In these contexts, informational acquisition via media exposure serves as an optimal alternative to seeking interpersonal intergroup contact, which may not be as conveniently available or could be perceived to be associated with various intercultural relational barriers.

As one subconstruct of SIG, Joyce and Harwood (2020) described the drive of social uncertainty reduction, which "reflects a desire for media that support [an] understanding of how groups work and what members of different groups are like" (p. 73). In their examination of this concept, the researchers observed that motivations to reduce ethnic outgroup uncertainty were associated with heightened perceptions of success in reducing this uncertainty during media use. Additionally, social uncertainty reduction gratifications were associated with more favorable evaluations of the messages providing said gratifications. Such outcomes could predict returning to these messages, or others perceived as similar, in order to satiate information gaps that individuals may perceive themselves to hold regarding particular REI others. Though this study was conducted among White respondents with reference to Black media figures, the conclusions have the potential to apply more broadly. It is correspondingly feasible that REI minorities are using media to better understand majority groups, and the nature of hegemonic practices, as well as other REI minorities.

In addition to consuming media messages featuring REI outgroups in order to reduce uncertainty about them, the temporarily expanding the boundaries of the self (TEBOTS; Slater et al., 2014) model has been used to suggest that taking the perspective of outgroups can serve functions related to the temporary relief to the emotional and cognitive demands of self-regulation. In essence, there can be palliative affordances of taking perspectives of those dissimilar to the self. Indeed, research on majority REI media users suggested that intentions to consume media content about other social outgroups

may be a function of TEBOTS considerations rather than out of social justice concerns (Tukachinsky Forster et al., 2022).

More research is necessary to examine specifically how REI could influence the seeking of PSIs and PSRs with those of different REI or cultural backgrounds and the degree to which such tendencies are motivated by uncertainty reduction or ego relief. Nevertheless, if counterstereotypical and nonstigmatizing media figure portrayals are used for either of these purposes, these depictions could still promote a broadened cultural awareness, which holds both strategic and practical value. Such prescriptions would only be appropriate, however, with additional research and a more sophisticated understanding of how PSEs are manifested and perceived for individuals of varied REIs, and with regard to a variety of REI outgroup members.

Outcomes of Parasocial Experiences as a Function of Racial/Ethnic Identity

Beyond examining the effect of REI on PSEs and related selective exposure tendencies, it is important to assess how REI may facilitate specific and unique cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes of PSEs. The association of a given REI, whether ingroup or outgroup, with a media figure delivering a particular message, or experiencing some set of circumstances, could fundamentally alter how the depictions are interpreted, how they make media users feel, and what it could prompt media users to do. The variety of outcomes that REI alignment in PSEs could influence are myriad. In this section, we highlight three influences of PSEs: influences on product/brand support, influences on support for causes and policy related to REI equity, and influences on media users' perceptions of their identity. Each outcome is highlighted due to its popularity in parasocial literature, as well as due to practical significance of these influences on communities and individuals associated with marginalized REIs.

REI, Advertising, and Product Support Intentions

One ubiquitously examined outcome of PSEs in the literature pertains to affordances for increasing product and brand support in advertising and marketing (see Chapter 16 in this volume). Previous research indicated that PSIs can influence consumers' purchase intentions through perceived trust and credibility of both the brand and the media figure endorsing the product (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Once again, perceptions of similarity and homophily are routinely described as facilitators of perceptions of trust and credibility in others (McPherson et al., 2001). Social media (e.g., Instagram) emerged as a popular place for influencers to promote brands they like. These influencers facilitate PSEs, which, in turn, lead to a profound effect on consumers by increasing trustworthiness, positive brand attitudes, and purchase intentions (Lin et al., 2021). Conceivably, if REI promotes PSRs, it can also facilitate the persuasive effect of the spokesperson.

In other words, PSRs can then serve as a mediator of the well-documented persuasive effects of REI.

For example, Appiah and Liu (2009) studied the role of REIs on product attitudes and purchase intentions. In their experiment, they assessed advertisements that depicted either a White or Chinese model along with ethnic and cultural cues. The results demonstrated, overall, that Chinese respondents perceived the Chinese cultural and ethnic cues, including a Chinese model specifically, as more favorable than they did those features in the predominantly White advertisements. In all, when Chinese participants were exposed to models that were part of the same REI, they were more likely to purchase the products being sold in the ads in the experiment.

Zúñiga (2016) extended these findings by examining the effect of cultural and ethnic primes in advertising on attitudes and purchase intentions for a sample of Black college students. The researcher conducted an experiment in which respondents were exposed to advertisements that featured either a Black or White model and high or low cultural ethnic primes. The results of the study demonstrated that Black respondents held more positive attitudes toward the advertisement, more positive brand attitudes, and higher purchase intentions when the advertisements contained a Black model. In all, advertising appears to be more persuasive to the extent that individuals identify with, and feel similar to, an advertising model. Notably, identification and perceived similarity are known to enhance PSEs (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Thus, although PSEs were not assessed in these studies, they identify patterns that could be anticipated within such a context.

Indeed, several researchers have found strong associations between PSIs and purchase intention in different cultural contexts (i.e., with Chinese and French adult consumers; Hwang & Zhang, 2018). Most recently, Lee and Lee (2022) explored the influence of PSIs with beauty YouTubers on purchase intentions of young Korean women. The experiment established that when Korean women engaged in PSE with the YouTuber, they were more likely to feel familiar with the product and could imagine themselves trying the beauty item. This led to lower risk perceptions, which in turn resulted in greater purchase intentions of the beauty product.

More research should explore the possible impact of PSEs on support for REI minority-owned businesses. When individuals see media figures of ingroup REIs endorsing products from these businesses, it would be useful to determine if the alignments of the REI of the spokesperson, prospective customer, and business owner could produce unique patterns of support and purchase intentions for those particular businesses. In other words, could REI alignments of media figures with media users encourage patronage with minority-owned businesses as a function of how the parasocial tie is experienced? Such research has implications for remediating the wealth gap in the United States currently manifest between individuals of minority and majority REIs and may be key to overcoming inequitable social identity-related support for some businesses over others.

Influencing Support for REI Minority Issues

Parasocial experiences with media figures of varied REIs can promote media users' support for causes related to those REIs. Much of the research examining these effects tends to draw from mediated and parasocial contact frameworks (see Chapter 12 for a detailed review of theory and research in this area). Mediated contact is especially important for viewers who do not have as much experience with a particular social group in an interpersonal context, thus creating a context to learn more about members of a group through media messages (Schiappa et al., 2005). General, and especially counterstereotypical, exposure to REI minorities in the media has been shown to increase favorable opinions on racialized social issues, including affirmative action, fair housing, criminal justice reform, voting rights, and diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace (e.g., Ramasubramanian, 2011; Stamps & Sahlman, 2021). Conversely, exposure to negative, stereotypical portrayals of outgroup members lead to more negative attitudes toward those outgroups and promoted support for initiatives that hurt them (e.g., Harwood & Joyce, 2012; Stamps & Sahlman, 2021).

Although these studies rarely assess PSIs or PSRs, specifically, they do indicate that mediated interactions can lead to discriminatory or egalitarian policy inclinations. Future research must examine the perspective of racial and ethnic minorities and how identity correspondence, or lack thereof, in their PSEs may be uniquely influencing support for social issues affecting various REIs. These PSEs have the potential to enhance allyship between minority groups and even perceived solidarity in the face of marginalizing experiences. An enhanced awareness of the types of identity representations that may be implemented by media producers for the purposes of increasing support for social issues that affect marginalized communities can move society one step closer to more effective efforts toward diversity, equity, and inclusion.

REI and Influences on Ingroup and Self-Perceptions

In addition to particular PSEs influencing how we see, and advocate on behalf of, various REIs, mediated encounters can influence how media users of varied REIs see themselves. Research employing SIG precepts to examine how exposure to media featuring REI ingroups influences perceptions about this social identity has provided insight in this domain. In one study, Abrams and Giles (2009) sought to determine influences of REI-based selectivity on perceptions of ingroup vitality, "defined as a group's [perceived] position in the intergroup hierarchy" (p. 248). Findings demonstrated that, for the Hispanic study respondents, selectively choosing to pursue or avoid media featuring others of a similar REI background was positively and negatively, respectively, associated with perceptions of ingroup vitality. Though this study was correlational in nature and did not examine PSEs as contributory elements to the predicted phenomenon, it did lend support to the notion that media users, notably those associated with an ethnic minority, have ingroup REI perceptions that are tied to the types of media figures they choose to seek

out or avoid. These identity outcomes could readily be seen as a potential artifact of such media exposure tendencies.

Though distinct from a PSR, identification with media figures is a type of mediated relationship that has been linked to influencing self-concept of individuals in general (Sestir & Green, 2010) and in minority individuals in particular (Ward, 2004). Ward (2004), specifically, explored the relationship between identification with media figures and self-concept outcomes on Black adolescents. In a survey study, Ward assessed respondents' identification with particular television characters and associations with various types of self-esteem, including performance, appearance, racial, social, and overall. When the Black participants indicated having greater identification relationships with popular Black male characters, this predicted higher performance, appearance, and overall self-esteem. Those Black participants who indicated increased identification with popular White male characters did not see these same self-esteem gains and in some cases were associated with losses. In general, comparison with the REI outgroup was not as common as that which occurred with the ingroup. Ward (2004) proposed that it is possible that stigmatized individuals identify and make unique comparisons with ingroup media figures as a protective measure. They avoid using exemplars and standards that may exceed their notions of what is culturally possible for them, which in turn increases self-esteem.

Additional research further suggested that engaging, and identifying with, media figures may be related to self-esteem, especially when REI is salient. For instance, McCullough et al. (2021) investigated the association between watching Asian American YouTubers and self-esteem among those who identify as East and Southeast Asian Americans. The researchers included racial identity as a variable in their model, proposing that three components of racial identity (e.g., ingroup solidarity, satisfaction with identity, and centrality of identity) could play mediating roles in the overall relationship between YouTube engagement and self-esteem. The results of their survey demonstrated that frequently watching Asian American YouTubers was positively associated with satisfaction with racial identity, which was the primary racial identity component that predicted positive self-esteem. While PSIs and PSRs were, again, not directly assessed in this study, it is interesting to note that routine interaction with REI-congruent Asian American YouTubers—a noted facilitator of PSRs (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019)—was positively associated with racial identity and self-esteem. This relationship, though correlational, provides a picture of the potential importance of racial identity of media figures on both self-esteem and satisfaction with one's racial identity. Engaging in PSIs or PSRs with the same REI media figures could increase both the salience and satisfaction with an individuals' racial identity, leading to possible greater overall self-esteem.

In addition, several past research studies demonstrated the effects of media images and, by extension, the influence of media characters, specifically, on minority children and adolescents' identity (e.g., Martins & Harrison, 2012; Rivadeneyra et al., 2007). For example, Martins and Harrison (2012) examined the long-term effects of television

consumption on global self-esteem for White and Black elementary school-aged children (e.g., ages 7–13). Using survey methods, the children responded to several measures, including television exposure, global self-esteem, race, gender, and body satisfaction. The researchers indicated that television viewing was a predictor of lowered self-esteem over time for White and Black girls and Black boys. Rivadeneyra and colleagues (2007) similarly observed that social and appearance self-esteem were negatively correlated with television use for Latino youth.

Martins and Harrison (2012) explained that because much of the content on television has tended to reinforce stigmatizing gender roles and harmful racial stereotypes about social identity minorities, children associated with these identities, who are exposed to these messages, may be influenced to view themselves with diminished self-worth over time. Mediated relationships precipitating enhanced attention and social comparison engagement with mainstream portrayals of minority REIs serve the function of internalizing those messages, facilitating their implementation to better understand the self (Riles & Adams, 2020). These internalized negative images of ingroups, relative to majority characters or other outgroups, may lead to adolescents feeling inadequate, therefore resulting in lowered self-esteem. More counterstereotypical minority REI role models would appear necessary to combat some of these harmful self-concept influences.

Concluding Remarks

All throughout this chapter, the need for more research that explicitly examines the role of REI in the experience of parasocial phenomena has been articulated. Few studies explore the role of this dimension of identity, typically employing it as no more than a control variable whose influences largely go unreported in the study. In this chapter, the call is made explicit that more scholarship is necessary that integrates this aspect of identity into the experience of parasocial ties, as well as their influences on selective exposure dispositions and broad influences of message exposure. More specifically, additional research is warranted that examines individuals who identify with minority REIs and how their PSEs are attenuated when they encounter REI ingroup media figures, as well as other minority REI outgroups. All too often, where REI comparisons are made, they are with reference to the majority group, implying that this group's experiences are representative of some standard or normative prototype (Riles et al., in press). Future research would benefit incredibly from examining differences between minoritized identities in order to better understand when, how, and why those identities may be major influences on PSEs, as well as situations where they do not. As aforementioned, scholarly evidence suggests that REI may matter relatively more in the everyday lived and mediated experiences of racial and ethnic minorities (David et al., 2002; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015). Such a setting provides a robust context for better understanding how REI may be influencing the intensity of our PSEs.

Furthermore, it behooves researchers to assess the role of REI in ways that do not assume this is an equally salient identity for all study participants. Incorporating measures

of ethnocentrism and identity salience must become increasingly commonplace to avoid painting everyone, even those within an REI designation, with the same brush. Researchers should not make an assumption about who does and does not conceive of REI as a central component of their social identity. In addition to including items assessing identity salience, future research may consider having respondents report their social identity in an open-ended format (Riles et al., in press). Depending on the placement of REI, or whether it is included at all, researchers should factor this into their considerations of the influence of REI on PSEs. Inclusive research practices must be implemented that overcome relatively narrow contexts for scholarly exploration and permit respondents to be seen as they see themselves.

In addition to the aforementioned dearth of research examining how REI can influence patterns of PSIs and PSRs, to our knowledge, no research exists exploring how REI could be influencing the many other PSEs that are routinely examined in mediated communication research. Parasocial attachment (e.g., Stever, 2017) pertains to the feelings of safe haven and security that arise from PSRs. How might REI factor into how secure individuals feel when engaged with a particular parasocial other? Parasocial romances (Tukachinsky, 2010) are similar to real-world romances in that both are associated with physical and emotional attraction, along with a desire for physical and emotional closeness. In what ways might the REI of the media user and media figure prompt unique patterns of attraction and desired closeness? Parasocial breakup (see Chapter 6 in this volume) pertains to the grief and sense of loss experienced when a preferred PSR target discontinues producing material or passes away. How might the congruence of REI characteristics influence the intensity of the grief felt or the duration of its onset? Parasocial perception (Riles & Adams, 2020) references the thoughts and attributes we assign to notable PSR others, notably as they relate to implications for how those others feel about us or people like us. When those PSR others are (in)congruent in terms of REI, how might this influence how we perceive those media figures to actually feel about us? A number of different PSEs have been elucidated over the past several decades, and REI may play a substantial role, for many, in determining the nature of those experiences.

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CHAPTER

19

Cultural Perspective: A Call for Comparative Research

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Abstract

Although parasocial relationships (PSRs) and parasocial interactions (PSIs) have been studied around the globe, there is a paucity of research that directly compares the characteristics and consequences of these experiences in different cultures. While there is a scarcity of research directly comparing samples from different cultures, research conducted in non-Western cultures uncovered patterns that diverge from findings of studies performed in Western cultures. This indirect evidence of cultural differences gave raise to abundant theorization of the influence of culture on PSEs. This chapter makes the case for why parasocial experiences can vary across cultures and outlines a research agenda for further examination of these questions.

Key Words: cross-national, cross-cultural, intercultural, comparative research

Introduction

Parasocial experiences (PSEs) have been studied in many cultures and around the globe, from India (e.g., Manchanda et al., 2022), China (Shan et al., 2020), and South Korea (e.g., Lee & Lee, 2022) to the Netherlands (e.g., Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2020), New Zealand, and the United States (Hakim & Liu, 2021). Accordingly, the panel of authors contributing to this volume is geographically diverse, representing scholars from the United Kingdom (David Giles), Germany (e.g., Holger Schramm), Israel (Jonathan Cohen), and Finland (Juha Munnuka). This diversity attests to the relevancy of parasocial phenomena research across cultures, alluding to the universal potential, perhaps even fundamentally human nature, of these experiences. Yet, the boundary conditions of these global phenomena—the extent to which relationships between communication variables uncovered in one culture apply to another—are rarely explicitly considered. Theoretical models of media use and reception may be culture specific (Hasebrink, 2012), rendering it imperative to conduct comparative research on media use in general and PSEs in particular.

While there is a paucity of research directly comparing samples from different cultures, research conducted in non-Western cultures uncovered patterns that diverge from

findings of studies performed in Western cultures. This indirect evidence of cultural differences gave rise to abundant theorization of the influence of culture on PSEs. For example, Agnihotri and Bhattacharya (2021) found that traditional celebrities' endorsement of products was more effective than that of social media influencers in India. This finding runs contrary to studies conducted in Western countries, which reported no significant difference between the two types of endorsers. Furthermore, contrary to the theorization of parasocial relationships (PSRs) in the West, consumers in India rated their PSRs with traditional celebrities stronger than the PSRs with social media influencers. The researchers attributed the finding partly to India's collectivistic and its unique materialistic cultural context. In this context, people value material wealth and success to display quality to others. Since traditional celebrities in India are wealthier and better known than social media influencers, the former group are the ones with whom people prefer to associate and develop PSRs.

Other researchers that have conducted studies in non-Western cultures point out that their findings could be culture specific and require replication in other cultures. For example, in an experiment to Chinese residents, placing cute images in a social media post of a luxury brand with relatively low recognition facilitated consumers' parasocial interaction (PSI) with the brand. This PSI further triggered attributions of brand personality and encouraged greater brand admiration (Shen, 2020). However, the researcher alerted readers that people from collectivistic cultures are more likely to be influenced by other social media users, while those from individualistic cultures have higher anthropomorphic tendencies. Furthermore, the definitions and perceptions of "cute" differ in Asian and Western cultures.

Although these studies did not involve cross-cultural comparisons, these researchers have paid particular attention to the cultural context that may qualify their findings. On the one hand, these researchers have recognized their studies' value of enriching the existing PSE studies predominantly based on Western samples. On the other hand, they have explained the studies' limitation of solely relying on non-Western samples and underscored the necessity to conduct cross-cultural comparison in this domain.

However, the same logic should be applied to interpreting results from studies conducted on Western samples, which account for the vast majority of research in this field. For example, Tukachinsky et al.'s (2020) meta-analysis of PSI and PSR reported results from 224 samples, of which 161 came from the United States or Europe. A question arises, then, how does this body of knowledge apply worldwide? Regretfully, while studies conducted in non-Western samples often stress that their findings may be culture specific and have to be examined in other cultural groups (e.g., Shen, 2020; Song & Fox, 2016), researchers that collect data using Western samples often treat culture as invisible, failing to culturally contextualize their findings. The following sections make the case for theorizing cultural differences in PSEs and offering a research agenda for further understanding the role of culture in this domain.

Theorization of Cultural/National Differences in PSRs

Comparative research can uncover how structural, societal-level differences and cultural values and norms that govern nonmediated interpersonal relationships attenuate ways in which PSEs are formed, maintained, and lead to subsequent effects. With PSEs positioned at the intersection between media and interpersonal research, both bodies of literature can guide the theorization and empirical investigation of cultural/national differences in this domain.

Media Practices Research

Although PSEs constitute a private psychological process, they (like other aspects of media consumption and reception) should be understood within broader global, national, and regional contexts (Couldry & Hepp, 2012). Specifically, various cultural, societal, political, and economic forces shape unique conditions for individual-level media use and experiences. Macro-level factors, such as digital accessibility, literacy rates, and media market structure and media systems create distinct affordances, as well as different value structures and traditions that result in different media content, and give rise to culture-specific media use norms and practices (Hasebrink, 2012).

For example, past studies revealed cross-national differences in the role of media in people's lives. On the most fundamental level, considering just the sheer amount of media consumption, individuals from the United States generally spent more time watching television than individuals in Asian (e.g., Hasebrink, 2012; Smith Speck & Roy, 2008) and European countries (e.g., Hasebrink, 2012; Roman et al., 2017). Yet, Americans reported relatively lower levels of perceived realism compared to survey respondents from Asian and Latin American countries (Smith Speck & Roy, 2008). Teens in Spain, Ireland, and four Latin American countries reported not only differences in the amount of television exposure but also revealed cross-national differences in familial media practices, such as their parents' propensity to engage in restrictive and instructive mediation (Aierbe et al., 2014). These distinct media use patterns reflect deeper differences in cultural discourse and values surrounding media use. In an older study, Newton and Buck (1985) examined sixth graders' relationship to television in Japan, Korea, the Philippines, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The study revealed some cultural differences (albeit not systematic and often moderated by gender) in how children's self-concept was related to television, suggesting that media play a different psychological role in the lives of youth around the globe.

In all, to understand PSEs from a cross-cultural and cross-national perspective, comparative research has to consider contextual factors on both a micro and a macro level. Micro-level variables can include media use practices (e.g., amount of time spent with media, coviewing), perceived media use norms, and perceptions of media content (e.g., gratifications sought, perceived realism, media literacy). On a macro level, studies should consider media system variables such as the media's business model and diffusion

and appropriation of media technologies. While the majority of comparative research on media systems focused on news (see Boomgaarden & Song, 2019, for review), these variables have the potential to also explain entertainment media consumption patterns (Lizardo & Skiles, 2009) and therefore can also be germane to advancing understanding of PSEs.

Interpersonal Relationships Research

The second foundation for cross-cultural PSE research lies in the application of interpersonal scholarship from a cross-cultural perspective. Since PSRs largely rely on the same psychological models that govern social relationships, it is vital to consider how individuals in different cultures relate to others in nonmediated relationships. Specifically, if many PSRs take the form of a quasi-friendship between audience member and a media personality, it is important to understand the role that values, expectations, and norms play in shaping friendship bonds in various cultures and how these differences will manifest in a parasocial context.

Interpersonal relationships research suggests that although friendship is universally important and contributes to happiness and well-being of people around the globe, the concept of friendship itself varies across countries (e.g., Demir et al., 2013; Doucerain et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2021). For example, while having fun together defined friendships in both Russian and Canadian samples, trust, intimacy, and support in times of hardship played a significantly more central role in Russia than in Canada (Doucerain et al., 2021). Similarly, a lab experiment revealed cultural differences in how dyads of friends of either Asian or European descent supported each other in response to a stressor (Chen et al., 2015). Moreover, cultural norms and perceptions about appropriateness can determine how emotions are expressed and communicated within the relationship (Aune & Aune, 1996).

To systematically understand culture-specific relational models, scholars have applied cultural typologies such as Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions, Parson's (1951) social systems approach, or Tönnies' classification of social structures into gesellschaft and gemeinschaft (Kito et al., 2017). Such studies usually compare the samples of participants from cultures with very distant ratings on a particular value that is hypothesized to predict certain relational outcomes. For example, Morris et al. (2008) utilized theorization of cultural differences in achievement/ascription orientation to explain differences in ratings of friendships among coworkers in a multinational sample. Their study revealed that friendships in Germany were rated significantly less close than friendships in the United States, Spain, and China. However, American friendships were driven by greater admiration and respect compared to friendships in other cultures.

Moving beyond general models of friendship, PSEs can be attenuated by differences in how people engage in imagined interactions. This form of internal dialog constitutes an integral part of normal social relationships (Honeycutt, 2003) and was theorized

to serve as the underlying mechanism of PSRs (Hu, et al., 2021; Tukachinsky Forster, 2021). Cross-cultural studies uncovered significant differences in the characteristics and functions of people's self-reported imagined interactions in a nonmediated context. For example, McCann and Honeycutt (2006) found that Americans reported imagined interactions that are more frequent and self-dominant compared to those reported by Thai and Japanese individuals. Moreover, compared to Thai individuals, people from the United States and Japan reported a greater share of imagined interactions that foster self-understanding—a function of imagined interactions that has been theorized to lie at the heart of PSRs. These differences in propensity to engage in imagined interactions could, therefore, have implications for how PSRs are experienced in these cultures.

Macro-Level Considerations

Cross-cultural examinations of PSEs need to not only recognize the cultural backgrounds of media users but also consider the culture of the media industry more broadly. The media industry, which involves various aspects of production, publication, and distribution of media products, is heavily influenced by the social, political, economic, religious, and ideological contexts of a society. Hollywood, K-pop, Bollywood, Japanese idol industry, Chinese cultural troupes, and many others represent distinct media industry cultures.

Celebrities (e.g., actors) are often characterized by standardized and peculiar virtues. The virtues are created based on the "formula" for their performance and the characters they play (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This formula results from the collaboration of the workers (celebrities themselves, agents, managers, makeup artists, public relations consultants, etc.) on the assembly lines of media industry. These assembly lines are preprogramed to operate under a certain production format that is rooted in the cultural backgrounds of media industry. Therefore, people's PSRs with celebrities may be influenced by their perceptions of not only the celebrities' virtues (e.g., attractiveness, homophily, etc.) but also the culture of the media industry they are embedded in.

Ample news reports and social media posts offer anecdotal evidence of the connections between fans' PSRs and the culture of the media industry. Celebrities in China, for example, are under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its Department of Propaganda. Therefore, they have the obligation of praising the party and promoting its lines, principles, and policies. This obligation has been significantly emphasized since the president of China Xi Jinping came into power. Xi, who is a strong proponent of the orthodoxical ideology of Chinese communism, has proposed the concept of "cultural confidence," urging Chinese people to be proud of Chinese culture. The core of this concept is to stress the Communist Party's leadership in arts and literature. Chinese writers and artists are encouraged to explore the approaches to integrate Chinese culture with the Marxist stance, viewpoint, and methodology (Cao, 2021; Wang, 2021). They are certainly not allowed to criticize the party or the government. Since Xi's inauguration, a number of famed television hosts and comedians have been squeezed out because of either

their disinterest in praising the party or the party's judgment that their performance was not compatible with the party's ideology. One of the most well-known cases is the former China Central Television host Bi Fujian. In a leaked video, he mocked and ridiculed the late Chairman Mao Zedong during a private dinner. As a consequence, his career was discontinued, and he has no longer been visible in media since then. Chinese people's reactions were quite mixed, which reflected not only their perceptions of this celebrity but also their opinions about the Communist Party, the government, and the "Chinese characteristics" of the media industry ("Bi Fujian Apologized," 2015).

Another recent example of how government intervenes with fan culture has been the controversy surrounding the popular actor Xiao Zhan in China. Early in 2020, a chapter of a slash story (erotic same-sex fan fiction) featuring Xiao as one of the protagonists was published in Archive of Our Own (AO3)—an open source repository for fan fiction and other fan work. Some of Xiao's fans in China deemed it an insult to their idol because he was depicted as a sex worker with gender dysphoria. Following the Chinese government's policies of restricting slash works and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning) literature, these fans reported this work of fan fiction to China's Internet police. Consequently, AO3 was blocked in China, and Xiao's fans faced a wave of public criticism. The scandal tarnished Xiao's reputation and destroyed the actor's star status. As a crisis management strategy, Xiao issued an apology and his management company released a music video featuring him singing a traditional Chinese communism song, "Ode to the Red Plum Blossoms" (Zhao, 2020). Xiao's response is culture specific in a number of ways. First, it demonstrates how, in this political and economic context, the celebrity is deemed responsible for the actions of his fans (in this case, slash fiction creators). It also reflects the need of the celebrity to proclaim allegiance to CCP's leadership of Chinese media industry. Finally, this incident showcases the power of the Chinese government in making and breaking celebrities through direct interference with fan communities and creating a reporting culture for self-policing.

Not only government but also the management companies' business models can influence how fans connect to celebrities. For instance, to maximize the idol economy, as part of its business model, Chinese celebrity management teams hire "professional fans." They coordinate fan activities, set the tone in the community by enforcing code of conduct, and serve as liaisons between the celebrity management team and the fan community.

K-pop culture presents another example of how the industry structure can impact the fandom community. While K-pop has achieved global success in the past few years, it also brought suspicions and controversies revolving around its dark side (Cambell & Kim, 2019). The K-pop industry frequently suffers from scandals of assaults, prostitution, suicides, and spy cams, which makes people doubt its idol system that rigorously trains artists from a young age (called "trainees") to their early 20s. The artists may be required to sign long-term contracts (some can be as long as 10 years) with their management agencies with extremely demanding conditions. One of the most influential incidents was the

singer and actress Sulli's suicide. Fans attributed this tragedy to the mental illness caused by her violations of some unfair conditions imposed by her management companies. For instance, she disclosed her romantic relationship status and her severe depression, both of which were off-limit topics according to her contract. The management companies often prohibit the celebrities from engaging in romantic relationships or require them to keep their relationships a secret in an effort to brand the celebrities' images as "available" parasocial lovers. Revelations of romantic relationships may undermine fans' affections toward them and further risk a profit decline (Hu et al., 2021; McCurry, 2019). As to disclosure of mental illness, it may stigmatize the celebrities and undermine their "healthy" images crafted by the management companies. These dark aspects of the Korean media industry are well known to the artists' fans, and thus their support of the artists entails sympathy and encouragement of "liberation" from the exploitation. Sulli's suicide caused her fans to not only express and communicate grief (as what their Western counterparts do) but also voice their anger over the media industry and make requests to pass laws to regulate management companies and punish abuse and "toxic fandom" (McCurry, 2019). This tragic event exposes the mechanisms that the entertainment industry uses to filter the fans' day-to-day engagement with celebrities.

Such anecdotal evidence demonstrates the importance of considering the political and economic context that can create cultural differences in the media industry and potentially influence audiences' PSRs. Unfortunately, PSR research is focused on the micro, individual psychological level, and largely fails to recognize the role of the media industry in this process. Future research has to consider such national differences from both theoretical and operational perspectives.

Empirical Evidence of Cultural Differences in PSEs

There is a paucity of comparative research on PSEs in different cultures. Thus, the review below discusses some (at times, tangentially) related theoretical constructs that can help infer the effect of culture on PSEs and PSRs in particular.

Overall PSE Intensity

The scarce intercultural research on the intensity of media users' involvement with media figures reveals mixed results. Some studies reported that U.S. media users reported higher attachment to celebrities than media users in Asian countries, while other studies found the opposite to be the case. For example, Li et al. (2017) compared Western Twitter users and Chinese social media Weibo users in terms of their attachments to the basketball sport, the National Basketball Association (NBA), the Los Angeles Lakers team, and the team's players. The researchers found that Chinese social media users expressed stronger attachment to the players than their Western counterparts. The opposite pattern was uncovered by Jung and Hwang (2016) in their examination of the relationships between attitudes toward celebrities, body satisfaction, and acceptance of cosmetic surgery in

female college students in South Korea and the United States. The research participants were instructed to select a same-sex living celebrity whose body/figure they admired and liked. The researchers discovered that the U.S. participants reported more positive attitudes toward their worshipped celebrities than did the Korean participants. A positive association emerged between attitudes toward celebrities and the acceptance of cosmetic surgery among the U.S. participants but not among the South Korean participants. The researchers concluded that this finding might suggest that celebrities in the United States, compared to the celebrities in South Korea, have a stronger influence on their fans to accept cosmetic surgeries.

Cultural differences in PSE intensity can apply not only to PSEs with media personalities, but also to intensity of PSEs with brands. Tsai and Men (2017) compared consumers in China and the United States in terms of the mechanisms of their engagement with brand pages on social network sites (SNSs) based on Triandis's typology (1995) of cultural dimensions. The researchers explored PSRs with the brand SNSs' representatives, social media dependency, and community identification as the antecedents of engagement. They found that the Chinese participants reported a significantly higher level of PSR compared to their American counterparts. The researchers attributed their findings to the differences between Chinese and American consumers' horizontal/vertical and individualist/collectivist cultural values. Chinese consumers were influenced by the dominant culture of horizontal collectivism and tended to maintain bonding with brands and like-minded brand consumers. In contrast, American consumers were led by vertical individualism, which values uniqueness and independence and thus were less dependent on social media, formed lower levels of PSRs with brand SNS representatives, and identified less with the other brand consumers. Although this marketing communication study's main goal was to provide empirical evidence for cross-cultural media campaigns, its findings yielded valuable insights into the role that culture plays in PSRs and the importance of cross-cultural comparisons of PSEs.

Another possible reason for differences in levels of self-reported PSE can be related to cultural norms governing these experiences. Specifically, the academic and the public discourse surrounding fandom in the United States was tainted by pathologizing these PSEs (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 9 in this volume; Tuachinsky Forster, 2021). Conversely, in some cultures, such as Japan, attachment to media figures is much more normalized (Karhulahti & Välisalo, 2021). This normative difference could result in a greater response bias in countries where the PSE-pathologizing ethos dominates the public discourse. Individuals in these countries would be likely to underreport their PSEs. Moreover, in the longer run, this cultural atmosphere can affect actual PSE experiences, beyond self-report bias. Pathologizing PSRs may create a normative pressure on individuals to avoid developing or maintaining their PSRs, which in turn could arrest the development of their PSRs. In other words, lower PSR scores in these cultures can indicate both underreporting and

an actual difference in the depth of the PSE due to conformity with societal norms that frown on PSRs.

Management of PSR Dissolution

Parasocial Breakup (PSB). When a celebrity morally transgresses, media users can respond in a number of ways. For example, they can forgive the celebrity or terminate their relationship with the media figure. It is conceivable that the media users' response to celebrity misbehavior varies by culture, depending on which norms have been violated by a transgressing celebrity and the cultural values that guide the media users' judgment of that misbehavior. Indeed, studies comparing media users in the United States and those in China (Huang, 2021) and South Korea (Choi et al., 2018) confirmed that cultural values guide the public response to celebrity scandals. Thus, a celebrity scandal will have different implications for judgments of credibility among media users in the United States and East Asian countries.

For example, Maiorescu (2017) analyzed magazine interviews of the actor Johnny Depp between 1999 and 2013 and people's reactions on Twitter to the allegations of domestic abuse against the celebrity. The researcher used Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions to explore the relationships between culture, responsibility attribution, and message valence. The content analysis of Depp's interviews uncovered that the actor emphasized openness to change, denoting his long-term orientation. In turn, tweeter responses to the scandal varied depending on the match between Depp's appeal and the country's values. In countries that are characterized by high long-term orientation (matching Depp's values expressed in his interview), the tweets were, on average, more positive. Conversely, cultures characterized by moderate long-term orientation and high short-term orientation produced more negative tweets. Meanwhile, there was also a high percentage of positive tweets (not as high as negative ones though) in moderate and low long-term orientation cultures. This may suggest that the celebrity's image was not significantly damaged despite a misfit along this cultural dimension. Although the majority of the tweets did not attribute the responsibility to the actor, the percentage of users who held the actor accountable was higher in cultures moderate in long-term orientation than in high long-term orientation cultures. As to indulgence/restraint and male dominance, no significant relationship was found between them and the valence of tweets and responsibility attribution. The researcher proposed that factors other than cultural dimensions, such as proneness to justice and gender, might confound the relationships. Although this study did not specifically assess PSEs, it is logical to assume that damage to a celebrity's credibility signals broader implications for PSRs and PSB. Further research is gravely needed to better understand how PSR dissolution is managed in different cultures by directly comparing media users from different countries or cultural backgrounds.

Parasocial Grief. People from different cultures vary substantially in terms of their perceptions of grief as well as how to express and communicate grief (Rosenblatt, 2001). The variations in the perceptions of grief are rooted in people's divergent views of reality across cultures, including the distinctions and connections between life and death, the losses associated with a deceased one, and the role of spirituality (Irish et al., 1993). In Chinese marital relationships, the passing of a husband, to a widow, may imply senses of loss, guilt, unfinished business, and continuing obligations whose meanings may be different in American culture. Moreover, a well-established body of literature has disclosed cultural differences of expression and communication of grief. Some cultures have lower tolerance to open expression of sorrow compared to others. When, where, and how mourning activities are conducted also vary by cultures (see review in Rosenblatt, 2008). The implications of these findings to PSR research, particularly PSB research, are multifaceted and profound.

The answer to whether there are cultural differences in parasocial grief is probably yes, considering the abundance of anecdotal evidence. For instance, the seventh day after a person's death in China is an important day for grieving. Therefore, it is common to see a surge of social media activities that reflect parasocial grief on the seventh day after a celebrity's death. If a researcher conducts a content analysis study, they should not be surprised by a surge of social media posts of parasocial grief on that day. *Día de los Muertos* is a traditional Mexican holiday when families welcome back the souls of their deceased relatives for a reunion. Fans in Mexico build altars on this day to honor their favorite artists from other countries, such as Whitney Houston from the United States and the K-pop star Kim Jong-hyun from South Korea (Alvarez, 2021). However, whether the findings of cultural differences in grief can be found in a parasocial context needs empirical inquiries.

Mechanisms Underlying PSE Differences

Importantly, even if the intensity of the PSEs is equivalent across cultures, their underlying mechanisms can be culture specific. Few studies conducted head-to-head cross-cultural comparisons of PSEs. In one such study, Schmid and Klimmt (2011) compared the intensity of PSRs with Harry Potter experienced by fans from a collectivistic (Mexico) versus an individualistic (Germany) nation. The researchers hypothesized that in a collectivistic culture that emphasizes social embeddedness over individual achievement, different character evaluations will drive the media users' parasocial attachment to the character. Data revealed that overall, Mexican fans reported higher levels of PSRs; however, contrary to their prediction, this experience was driven by the same precursors—attraction and homophily in both cultures.

As the field continues to formulate more nuanced theories of PSR initiation and development (see Chapter 5 in this volume), it is important to examine the extent to which these models uniformly apply across cultures. For example, models such the ones

discussed in Chapter 5 in this volume list specific predictors and antecedents of media users' propensity to engage with media figures and intensify their bond with them. However, none of these models explicitly accounts for the cultural context of the media experience and does not articulate ways in which different components of the model can have a different weight in different societies.

Implications for Media Effects Research

A meta-analysis found that the effect of PSRs on persuasive outcomes is consistent across studies using U.S.-based samples and studies conducted in other countries (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). However, notably, given the number of studies included in the meta-analysis, it was not possible to examine more fine-grained cultural differences between particular countries. Moreover, even if the size of the persuasive effect is equivalent in multiple cultures, these effects may be carried out through different processes. For instance, interviews with Indian and American consumers revealed that the effect of celebrity endorsement operates differently. In India, the effect was driven by media users' attraction to the celebrity's glamor and elevated status, whereas Americans related to the celebrities on a more personal level and feeling like they knew the celebrity (Biswas et al., 2009). Experimental research across multiple countries echoed these findings, demonstrating the evaluations of celebrity appeal in advertising are tied to the power distance in a given culture (Winterich et al., 2018). Thus, it is conceivable that media effects will be moderated by culture due to differences in the type of PSR (e.g., friendship, mentorship, etc.) and the relational characteristics of the PSR (e.g., intensity, intimacy level) that individuals in various cultures are more likely to forge.

Agenda for Comparative PSE Research

The previous section discussed the theoretical importance of examining PSEs from cross-cultural and cross-national perspectives. This section outlines several specific directions that research in this area can pursue.

Methodological Questions

First, it is important to validate existing measures of PSEs across cultures. Most of the measures of PSI and PSR have been developed in the United States and Germany but then utilized around the globe (see Chapter 4). Although these scales have been successfully implemented in studies around the world, however, few studies specifically sought to test the validity of these measures in different cultures. As a rare exception to this rule, Hakim and Liu (2021) developed a measure of PSRs with political figures (PSR-P). They found that the scale performed well in the United States and New Zealand but had unacceptably low reliability in Indonesia ($\alpha = .41$). The researchers attributed this discrepancy to the difference in the political structure in Indonesia compared to the other two countries included in the study.

Importantly, however, even if the scale reliability is adequate, a better clarification of the content validity of these scales in different cultures is needed. Arguably, certain expressions of PSRs or PSIs should be incorporated in measures of these experiences in some cultures but not others, depending on the cultural norms considering media use and involvement.

Comparison Between Predictors and Outcomes of PSRs

The country (United States vs. other countries) in which the data have been collected was not a significant moderator of predictors and effects of PSRs in Tukachinsky et al.'s (2020) meta-analysis. However, research conducting a direct within-study comparison is needed. Specifically, studies can identify which media user characteristics (e.g., loneliness, attachment style) and media personality variables (e.g., physical attractiveness, similarity) operate similarly in specific cultures. For instance, PSRs can serve predominantly different functions (e.g., social surrogacy, aspirational social comparison, connection with other fans) in different cultures and therefore rely on different mechanisms.

Another specific area of research needed here includes differences in how parasocial grief is managed in different cultures, examining how it can follow different social norms and traditions. Similar to Rosenblatt's (2008) perspective on grief research discussed in the section on managing PSR dissolution, our proposition is to give priority to the diversity of parasocial grief instead of seeking commonality across cultures. Similarly, research on enemyship suggests that there are cultural variations in how individuals manage hatred and dislike relationships with others in their social circle (e.g., Adams, 2005). Thus, as research on nonamicable PSRs expands (see Chapter 17 in this volume), scholars should examine how negative PSRs vary by culture.

Finally, researchers need to pay attention to the qualitative aspects of PSRs instead of only focusing on their quantitative features, such as intensity. For instance, in the past, Katz and Libes's (1992) interviews with viewers of the soap opera *Dallas* revealed how individuals from the United States, Israel, and Japan related the show differently and used it to reflect on their own identity in different ways. Applied more specifically to PSEs, qualitative research, including phenomenology and ethnography, has the potential to unearth the richness of PSEs and provide additional insights into how media users experience media. Once cultural differences are identified through a ground theory approach, quantitative research can be used to further validate these cultural differences on a larger scale.

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