

Parasocial Relationships in Adolescence: Emotional Attachment, Social Media Engagement, and their Impact on Developmental Outcomes

Deeksha Sashikumar

CPS Global School, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Email: [deekshasashikumar\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:deekshasashikumar[at]gmail.com)

Abstract: *The rapid advancement of social media and the expansion of digital entertainment platforms have transformed how individuals are exposed to celebrities, media personalities, and social media influencers. This has led to development of parasocial relationships (PSR) and parasocial interactions (PSI) among teenagers. Parasocial relationships refer to one-sided emotional connections between a media personality and a viewer, follower, or fan. Although such relationships may offer companionship, a sense of belonging, many emerging research suggests that such relationships cause complex psychological and developmental concerns especially among adolescents. This paper examines how parasocial bonds and parasocial interactions shape formation of identity, emotional regulation, and social behaviour. The research also considers how repeated exposure to curated digital personas could facilitate a partial dissolution of reality and fantasy, altering the understanding of authenticity and interpersonal reciprocity. Furthermore, continuous exposure to parasocial relationships may hinder the real-world social interactions, constrain mutual relationships, and increase social withdrawals. The intersection between parasocial attachment and social media addiction is also examined in terms of compulsive use, seeking validation, and emotional dependence. In striving to place parasocial phenomena within a larger developmental and psychological framework, this paper seeks to build a more nuanced understanding of the way digital-era attachments can influence and affect the lives of adolescents and their ability to function adhering to social structure.*

Keywords: parasocial relationships, adolescence, social media engagement, identity development, emotional dependency

1. Introduction

The concepts of parasocial relationships (PSR) and parasocial interactions (PSI) were first introduced in the literature by Horton and Wohl (1956), who defined the concepts as a type of association or imagined one-sided relationships formed by the audience with media personalities. The relationships generate the illusion of intimacy and reciprocity in the absence of actual mutual interaction. The concepts received relatively low scholarly attention in the past, and the subject of parasocial relationships and interactions was observed as relatively underexplored. However, a considerable increase in the interest for the concepts of parasocial relationships and interactions can be observed in the recent literature (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). The changing media environment, including the advancement in television and the emergence of digital and social media, has propelled the scientific exploration of the concepts of parasocial relationships and interactions; the subject is observed as more relevant from a scientific perspective. However, by 2020, the term “parasocial” also entered the cultural discourse, making common appearances in articles, such as USA Today and Wall Street Journal (Brisic, 2021; Gamerman, 2020) and websites like Hollywood Insider (e.g., Adamec, 2021).

Although the PSR and PSI phenomenon is applicable to younger age groups, their prevalence and intensity among the teenagers warrants specific attention. There is an evident spike in the interest level with media personalities, celebrities (Giles, 2002; Giles and Maltby, 2004; Maltby et al., 2005) and their interaction with heightened intensity (Cohen, 2003; Klimmt et al., 2006). Parasocial interaction has also been noted as serving a specific function with teenagers, as they progress through developmental tasks including identity

development and gradual autonomy from parents (Giles and Maltby, 2004). Consequently, this paper aims to examine how parasocial relationships and interactions influence emotional attachment, social media engagement, and developmental outcomes among adolescents. Understanding these dynamics is important for educators, parents, and mental health professionals who seek to support adolescents navigating increasingly mediated social environments.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a narrative literature review methodology to compile existing research on parasocial interactions and relationships during early adolescence. The literature that was deemed relevant was identified through systematic searches conducted on prominent academic databases, with emphasis on peer-reviewed studies that explored the psychological, emotional, and social aspects of parasocial engagement. A focus on empirical and theoretical literature written in English and published in the last two decades was given preference.

Formation and Characteristics of Parasocial Relationships in Adolescence

Psychologists have long argued that belongingness is a fundamental human motive (Maslow, 1954). A plethora of past researches suggest that people are driven to form and maintain positive, long-lasting relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). People who hold unfulfilled belonging needs are exposed to higher risk for a myriad of adverse mental and physical outcomes. The adolescents are at higher risk of developing PSR and PSI with their favourite celebrity especially with the emergence and advancement of digital media like YouTube, TIKTOK, Instagram etc. During this time of developing individuality and active engagement in identity development, parasocial relationships might offer

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symbolic identities to explore and might assist in honing their own beliefs, values, and perspectives (Giles and Maltby, 2004; Madison and Porter, 2015). Therefore, there are developmental implications in terms of which specific media persona young individuals choose to engage with. For example, a young individual wishing to transition from child to adult might establish a parasocial relation with a highly idolized movie star, offering them a desired form of identification other than parental figures (Adams-Price and Greene, 1990; Giles and Maltby, 2004; Klimmt et al., 2006). In addition, a parasocial relationship with a renowned choreographer in the entertainment business might offer a companionable mentoring to fulfil aspirations of aptitude and achievement.

Psychological and Emotional Consequences of Parasocial Involvement

A wide range of emerging researches has focused on the psychological and emotional effects of parasocial involvement, and the findings relate to positive as well as negative effects. In moderate parasocial involvement, adolescents tend to experience comradeship and emotional support, especially in situations of loneliness and pressures of life (Giles, 2002; Tukachinsky, 2011). In intense parasocial involvement, negative effects are manifest, for example, through dissatisfaction with their bodies and self-perception, stemming from the tendency to constantly compare themselves with perfect media personalities (Maltby et al., 2005; Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). Some researchers have additionally emphasized the tendency for parasocial involvement to blur the lines between reality and the virtual, resulting in unrealistic assumptions of success and intimacy (Cohen, 2004; Tukachinsky, 2011). Over a period, such distortions may eventually lead to heightened risk of anxiety, depression, and emotional dependency on media personalities (Maltby, 2005). Furthermore, excessive parasocial relationships have also been associated with social withdrawal and lack of motivation to develop reciprocal real-life relations. This reduced motivation may lead to social withdrawal and isolation during a critical development period especially during adolescence (Giles and Maltby, 2004; Liebers and Schramm, 2019).

Impact of Parasocial Relationships on Real-World Social Functioning

Studies that have tried to understand the implications of parasocial relationships on actual social interactions have found that strong one-sided relationships might impact how an adolescent develop and maintain reciprocal relationships. Although parasocial relationships provide a sense of belongingness, overdependency has also been associated with a reduction in face-to-face interaction and a decline in reciprocative social friendships (Tukachinsky, 2011; Giles and Maltby, 2004). Nevertheless, some studies have revealed that teenagers who engage substantially on mediated relationships may suffer from increased loneliness because parasocial relationships fail to offer the necessary feedback, emotional support and interaction that foster interpersonal skills (Cohen, 2004; Liebers and Schramm, 2019). Furthermore, strong levels of identification with influencers and celebrities may also affect perceptions about relationships in real life, causing discontent and dissatisfaction if friends do not measure up to ideals set by the media in terms of

attractiveness, success, or mutual responsiveness (Maltby, et al., 2005). Such differences may, over time, impede the development of stable peer relationships and opportunities for conflict resolution skills, empathies, and communication skills. Other observations have documented that over-involvement in parasocial relationships may negate time spent in physical social situations, which are necessary for exposure to diverse social experiences that are of value for healthy development (Steuer, 2017; Liebers and Schramm, 2019). Thus, the literature reviewed in the present chapter indicates that although parasocial relationships could complement adolescents' social worlds, overdependence on these could restrict the progression of genuine social interactions and real-world social efficiency.

Parasocial Attachment and Social Media Addiction

Recent studies have shown a significant link between parasocial relationship and addiction to social media usage, especially among young people who are regular users of online platforms. Parasocial relationships with social media influencers, celebrities, and online personalities can fuel addiction to social media usage, as people become emotionally invested in online updates (Tukachinsky, 2011; Steuer, 2017). This attachment can be further reinforced by employing functionalities of the platform that create a sense of intimacy through the use of direct address, live streaming, and interactive comments, in turn further enhances the illusion of mutual connection and compulsive engagement (Liebers and Schramm, 2019). Research has shown that the stronger the parasocial relationship, the more likely the teenager is to display problematic usage behaviours, such as excessive screen time, difficulty in disengaging, and mood regulation through online interactions (Kuss and Griffiths, 2017). Moreover, the behaviours associated with seeking validation, such as looking for validation from idolized media personalities or comparing one's own online profile to that of others, may create a sequence of dependency and fear of missing out. This compulsive behaviour may, in the long run, affect academic performance, sleep, and interpersonal relationships, suggesting potential risks to mental well-being (Andreassen, 2015; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Collectively, the literature suggests that PSR and PSI may act as a motivator and as well as a sustainer of social media addiction, and that these issues must be considered in tandem when thinking about adolescent digital behaviour and mental health.

3. Major Challenges

In the context of parasocial relationships, interactions, and social media engagement with regards to adolescents, some of the major challenges that have been highlighted by the literature are:

- 1) **Distorted Self-Image and Body Dissatisfaction:** Consistent and regular exposure to ideal representations of media celebrities contributes to unrealistic expectations about beauty, success, and lifestyle. Adolescents may become dissatisfied with who they are and how they look.
- 2) **Blurring of Reality and Mediated Illusion:** Teenagers might find it difficult distinguishing between authentic relationships and staged ones, which can lead them to harbour unrealistic ideas about friendship and success.

- 3) **Impaired Development of Real-World Social Skills:** Too much use of one-sided mediated relationships might lead to the loss of opportunities to engage in mutual interaction, conflict management, and other significant life skills.
- 4) **Social Withdrawal and Loneliness:** Although parasocial relationships may alleviate feelings of isolation to some degree, over-reliance on parasocial relationships can further solidify trends toward social seclusion from others and family.
- 5) **Emotional Dependency and Vulnerability:** They may over-rely on media personalities for validation and/or security, which may lead them to feel let down, anxious, or upset when their expectations are not met.
- 6) **Identity Confusion and Unrealistic Aspirations:** Strong identification with media figures could overshadow true self-exploratory activities, leading to confusion about personal goals, values, and capabilities.

4. Conclusion

Parasocial relationships and interactions have become the hallmark of modern teenage life, greatly influenced by the permeation of the wider world of social media, entertainment, and the influencer phenomenon. One-sided relationships often provide individuals with a source of friendship, guidance, and self-identity exploration, yet evidence shows that increased engagement with parasocial connections carries notable psychological outcomes. Excessive parasocial relations are linked with issues of bodily dissatisfaction, confused reality, emotional attachment, and the categorization of compulsive media engagement, contributing to the disturbance of the natural and healthy development of the self. Besides, excessive parasocial relations might also undermine the construction of two-way relationships, limiting the opportunity for the development of essential relational competencies and support systems.

Parasocial relationships have become deeply woven into adolescent digital life. While these one-sided attachments may offer comfort, inspiration, and models for identity exploration, sustained over engagement can interfere with emotional balance and reciprocal social development. The literature suggests that excessive parasocial involvement is associated with distorted self-image, social withdrawal, and compulsive media use. At the same time, moderated engagement may provide symbolic learning and coping resources. Future research should examine long term developmental trajectories and protective factors that help adolescents maintain balanced media relationships.

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