



Connecting in Isolation: Exploring the Sociological Relevance of Parasocial Relationships

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ABSTRACT :

Parasocial relationships, characterized by one-sided emotional connections between individuals and media figures, have gained increasing attention in contemporary psychological and sociological studies. This paper examines PSRs through sociological frameworks, particularly symbolic interactionism, which elucidates how media figures shape viewers' self-concept and social roles. Additionally, by exploring social capital theory, we highlight how PSRs foster micro-communities that transcend geographical boundaries, enhancing social interactions among fans. However, the concept of digital dualism reveals potential disconnects between online relationships and offline realities, leading to unrealistic expectations and feelings of inadequacy. Historical perspectives on PSRs, supported by empirical research, demonstrate their impact on different age and gender demographics. The findings underscore the intricate relationship between media consumption and individual behavior, illustrating both the emotional fulfillment and societal implications of PSRs. Ultimately, this study advocates for continued exploration of parasocial relationships, emphasizing their relevance in understanding contemporary social dynamics and the evolving nature of community in a mediated world.

KEYWORDS : Emotional, Geographical boundaries, Parasocial, Social dynamics, Symbolic interactionism



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INTRODUCTION :

In an age where screens dominate our lives, the lines between reality and fiction blur, giving rise to unique emotional connections known as parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships, where one person extends emotional energy, interest and time, and the other party, the persona, is completely unaware of the other's existence.

Although they are primarily catalyzed by the rise of the internet and media, their roots extend far deeper into human history, existing long before the digital age. These one-sided attachments can be traced back to our connections with influential figures such as political leaders, religious leaders, and even deities.

SOCIOLOGICAL RELEVANCE :

From a sociological perspective, PSRs can be understood through the lens of "symbolic interactionism". Symbolic Interactionism is a sociological perspective founded by thinkers like George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, that focuses on the meanings individuals derive from social interactions and the symbols that shape their experiences. When applied to parasocial relationships, as viewers engage with media content, they interpret the actions, narratives, and symbols associated with these figures, often internalizing them as part of their own self-concept. Media figures become "significant others," influencing how audiences perceive themselves and their social roles. For instance, a viewer may identify with a character's struggles or achievements, shaping their own aspirations and social behaviors. Thus, parasocial relationships exemplify the symbolic interactionist idea that meaning is constructed through interactions, even in one-sided relationships, reflecting broader social dynamics and individual identity formation.

Additionally, "social capital" theory comes into play, as PSRs can facilitate connections among individuals who share similar attachments, thereby creating micro-communities and



networks that transcend geographical boundaries. Social capital refers to the value derived from social networks, including the resources and support individuals gain from their relationships. In the context of PSRs, individuals who develop emotional attachments to the same media figures often find common ground, which can lead to the formation of micro-communities. This interconnection not only enhances personal relationships among fans but also creates collective identities that can influence cultural trends and social movements. Consequently, the impact of parasocial relationships extends beyond individual attachment, highlighting their potential to enrich social lives and cultivate community engagement in a rapidly evolving media landscape.

Digital dualism is a concept that refers to the perceived divide between online and offline realities. It suggests that interactions and identities in digital spaces are often viewed as separate or distinct from those in the physical world. In the context of parasocial relationships (PSRs), digital dualism highlights the potential pitfalls of developing one-sided emotional attachments to media figures. As individuals engage with these figures online, they may idealize their personas, forming attachments based on curated, often unrealistic portrayals. This can lead to a disconnect when individuals seek to replicate the emotional satisfaction of these online interactions in their offline lives, resulting in disappointment or feelings of inadequacy when real relationships do not meet their expectations.

MAJOR FINDINGS AND ARGUMENTS:

Parasocial interaction was first described from the perspective of media and communication studies. In 1956, Horton and Wohl explored the different interactions between mass media users and media figures and determined the existence of a parasocial relationship where the user acts as though they are involved in a typical social relationship. Horton and Wohl suggested that for most people, parasocial interactions with personae complement their current social interactions, while also suggesting that there are some individuals who exhibit extreme parasociality, or they substitute parasocial interactions for actual social interactions.

Perse and Rubin (1989) contested this view, finding that parasocial interactions occurred as



a natural byproduct of time spent with media figures. Rubin analyzed the process of parasocial relationship development by applying principles of uncertainty reduction theory, which states that uncertainty about others is reduced over time through communication, allowing for increased attraction and relationship growth.

In 1956, T.M. Newcomb's (1956) reinforcement theory explained that following a rewarding interaction an attraction is formed. A gratifying relationship is formed as a result of social attraction and interactive environments created by the media persona

The most used measurement instrument for parasocial phenomena is the Parasocial Interaction Scale (PSI Scale), which was developed by Rubin, Perse, and Powell in 1985 to assess interpersonal relationships with media personalities.

In 2006, researchers David Giles and John Maltby classified parasocial relationships into three subcategories: entertainment-social, intense-personal and borderline-pathological. According to Giles and Maltby, most parasocial relationships are categorized as entertainment-social. This means individuals engage with a celebrity or character primarily for enjoyment and to enhance their real-life relationships. In contrast, intense-personal parasocial relationships involve a recognition that the connection is not real, yet feelings for the person or character can still become overwhelming. While having a celebrity crush is common, becoming fixated and viewing someone as a soul mate or best friend crosses into a more intense emotional territory. The least common and most concerning type is the borderline-pathological parasocial relationship. In these cases, individuals may lose control over their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors, which can potentially lead to harmful actions, including stalking or violence.

FACTORS AFFECTING THE IMPACT OF PARASOCIAL RELATIOSHIPS:

Gender is a large factor when studying the impact of parasocial relationships on adolescence. Gleason (2017) examined the differences between females and males in light of parasocial relationships and found that “boys chose more athletes than girls and were more likely to imagine celebrities as authority figures or mentors than friends. Celebrities afforded



friendship for girls, who overwhelmingly focused on actresses. This may suggest that the female population has more of a likelihood to be in a parasocial relationship with a celebrity. This would mean that they have that feeling that they know that celebrity and are in a two-way friendship with them. The male population on the other hand seems to be looking up to the celebrity/athlete as someone to learn from rather than actually being in a relationship with that person.

Mental health and parasocial relationships go hand in hand when trying to figure out exactly where parasocial relationships come from and why they happen. De Bérail, P. et. al (2019) discovered that adolescents with an internet addiction, especially to watching vloggers or influencers on YouTube often develop a parasocial relationship with those that they are watching. The most extreme level is when the fan stalks the celebrity and thinks that they have a chance to get to know them personally. This leads to obsession and in turn where the first anti-stalking laws came into play.

CONCLUSION :

Parasocial relationships themselves aren't inherently good or bad; they simply exist. They can serve as a way to gain insight into your mental health. If you find your parasocial connections to be positive, it likely indicates a healthy emotional and social state. However, if these relationships feel overwhelming or begin to dominate your

life, it may suggest that there are underlying mental health issues that need attention. In conclusion, parasocial relationships are a significant aspect of contemporary social dynamics, shaped by the increasing prevalence of media in our lives. They offer insights into the complexities of human interaction in the digital age, revealing how one-sided connections can fulfill emotional needs while simultaneously influencing individual behaviors and societal norms. Through a sociological lens, we see that these relationships not only provide a sense of companionship but also reflect broader cultural trends and the evolving nature of community in an increasingly mediated world. As we continue to navigate these connections, understanding their implications is essential for both individuals and society, prompting further exploration into the intricate relationship between media consumption and interpersonal dynamics.



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