

Parasocial Relationships and Social Media

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Abstract

Since recent years have brought popularity to new media platforms, this paper aimed to explore its impact on Parasocial Relationships. Thus, as the ease with which adolescents can access these platforms today influences their likeliness to form parasocial relationships, the research question was asked: To what extent do parasocial relationships grow due to heightened Twitch, TikTok, and Twitter usage? To answer the question, a qualitative data collection method of surveys was utilized. It was concluded that increased social media usage causes the proliferation of parasocial relationships as adolescents increased social media use establishes a sense of intimacy between themselves and media personalities. These platforms allow celebrities to present a candid, “behind-the-scenes” view of their daily life, which provides viewers with the ultimate intimate details of their existence which reinforces the emotional connections and illusions created and then fostered by a parasocial relationship.

Keywords: Parasocial Relationships, Social Media, Adolescents

1. Introduction

Social media has been a rapidly growing phenomenon since the early 2000s, and its early beginnings were fraught with technical issues. Tom Anderson, Chris DeWolfe, Mark Zuckerberg, Jawed Karim, Steve Chen, and Chad Hurley were just a few of the main men that are responsible for this. They created the early 2000s’ most recognizable platforms: MySpace, Facebook, and Youtube. However, it is now unquestionably true that now MySpace and Facebook have become far too outdated, due to modern-day technological developments, and newly developed and piloted media, fraught with different problems, have become popular. For example, people have recently begun worrying about issues such as the academic development of students in the face of these prevalent platforms (Hashem, 2015). However, the issue discussed in this paper has much more to do with the mental health of students.

Recent years have brought popularity to more media platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, and Twitch. With them, the problems with parasocial relationships and interactions have increased. Parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions are generally defined to be “symbolic, one-sided ties that individuals imagine with media figures and celebrities” (Gleason et al., 2017). Thus, it is possible to conclude that numerous adolescents who use social media platforms, are at risk of or have already formed such relations, especially during quarantine, since parasocial relationships are more likely to form as a consequence of loneliness (Aytulun & Büyükhahin, 2020). The term “Parasocial Relationship” was coined by researchers Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in a 1996 sociology essay. They differentiated between parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions, by explaining that parasocial interaction is initiated and directed by the media person. It is “triggered if media performers acknowledge the audience's presence [during] their performance”. The media performer can do so by arranging an informal face-to-face gathering or verbally addressing the users (Horton and Wohl, 1956). In contrast, parasocial relationships were mainly used to address the specific nature of an interaction between a media person and a user (Rosaen et al., 2015).

So, the “parasocial relationship” term is used to refer to the type of interaction between a media person and users. This includes, for instance, interactions that consist of the influencer speaking directly to the audience and having an informal conversation with users.

Horton and Wohl also used the term “Parasocial Relationship” to characterize the long-term, typically positive, one-sided intimacy that users develop for media performers based mainly on repeated exposure to them. This cemented the difference between parasocial interactions and parasocial relationships as they are used interchangeably in the numerous other research papers on this topic. Dibble and the other authors compared what parasocial interactions and parasocial relationship measures were and argued that the commonly used measures utilized for parasocial interactions are measuring other issues and that parasocial interaction is not interchangeable with parasocial relationships (Rosaen et al., 2015).

Oftentimes, many people question if parasocial relationships are of positive or negative nature. While it is true that parasocial relationships can cause negative effects on the mental health of adolescents because they can lead to increased feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety when they take priority over real relationships, they are not all wholly negative. For instance, in a study conducted by Shaaba Lotun and other social and media psychology researchers, it was found that parasocial relationships could potentially be a useful new method that can help reach larger audiences with fewer resources and reduce levels of prejudice and stigma. The method used in Lotun’s study was viewers watching personal style videos meant to facilitate a real friendship between two stranger participants alongside a self-disclosure style video. In the videos, participants specifically watched a YouTuber talk about their journey with borderline personality disorder (BPD) and how it was perceived by the public. Then, after watching the stimuli materials participants were given a survey to allow the researchers to determine what type of prejudice they had and what remained after watching the videos. It was concluded that the participants had been able to reduce their explicit prejudice and intergroup anxiety. These lowered prejudice levels were directly related to stronger parasocial relationship bonds since the participants seemed to create a more intimate relationship with the YouTuber after watching her video (Lotun et al., 2022). The study presented an important conclusion for parasocial relationship research since commonly asked questions revolve around their nature and whether they are distinctly beneficial or detrimental. However, parasocial relationships are not distinctly positive or negative. While Lotun’s research presents a positive view of parasocial relationships and provides a preliminary introduction to the topic of parasocial relationships overall, it is important to recall that parasocial relationships’ effects on people could be either beneficial or harmful as it remains entirely dependent on the person and the context of the situation.

Furthermore, communications researcher Bradley Bond claims that adolescents are more likely to learn from media persons whom they perceive as trusted friends. This relates to parasocial relationships because whenever an influencer posts on social media, they allow their fan bases to gather an intimate ‘peek’ into their everyday lives. This is then frequently used to create an extremely carefully crafted image that fosters familiarity and intimacy between the influencer and their fans. Bond defines the ability of media personas to painstakingly craft an image and create a sense of closeness and familiarity between themselves and their followers on social media as “performative intimacy”. The phenomenon of performative intimacy strengthens parasocial relationships for fans while also allowing celebrities more marketing and brand opportunities. This occurs because as more parasocial relationships occur, an influencer or celebrity’s popularity also increases (Bond, 2016). This is important to take note of because it demonstrates where influencers generate their motivations to foster these parasocial relationships and initiate parasocial interactions. Furthermore, Bonds’ research also allows for a further positive interpretation of parasocial relationships. Additionally, it also creates an understanding of how deeply social media sites are able to truly affect adolescents’ day-to-day life. Also, it is an important revelation to note because the gap in research identified and written about revolved around the effect of social media on adolescents’ likelihood of forming parasocial relationships.

Additionally, another study written by anthropologist Zachary Sheldon aimed to determine whether parasocial interactions varied in strength depending on if a character is created fully through computer imagery, enhanced by computer-generated imagery, or when portrayed by a real human actor. To do so, Sheldon and the other researchers had over 100 participants watch a randomly selected movie that fulfilled three predetermined conditions before they measured the participant’s strength of parasocial interactions formed. As a result of this study, it was indicated that parasocial interactions formed with enhanced characters were just as strong as the ones formed with non-CGI

characters. However, since viewers were able to form stronger PSIs with human and CGI-enhanced characters than computer-generated ones, it was understood that movie viewers relate to CGI-enhanced characters and human characters just as effectively. However, it is also possible that the types of characters portrayed by fully computer-generated ones are simply far too unrelatable enough to the general public, creating a possible limitation (Sheldon et al., 2021). However, this remained a pertinent study to take note of because, though Twitch streamers, people who play videogames on the streaming platform “*Twitch*”, may not be computer generated, their image is not entirely realistic along with the many other influencers who are gaining popularity in the modern world.

As a result of all the information surrounding the effects and perceptions of parasocial relationships, it is crucial to explore how they are furthered due to society's development of technology. With social media platforms' increasing popularity since it provides a means of staying connected with society and individuals' favorite influencers, it becomes essential to explore social media's effects on parasocial relationships. Moreover, since it is understood that the ease with which adolescents are able to access these influences in the modern age influences their likeliness to form parasocial relationships, the question is posed: To what extent do parasocial relationships grow due to heightened Twitch, TikTok, and Twitter usage? According to Pew Research, about 67% of teens use TikTok while 23% use Twitch and Twitter. Overall, 35% of teens say they are on all of these sites and use one of them almost constantly (Pew Research, 2022). Thus, these three sites are the most popular as of now, ensuring that this research provides an updated addition to the many conversations surrounding the topic of Parasocial Relationships. In addition to the popularity of these three sites, since minimal and limited research exists that focuses on TikTok and Twitter in relation to parasocial relationships and the research in relation to Twitch is minimal, this research will be crucial in bridging this gap of knowledge. Few researchers have written about all three sites together which is also important since all three have become much more prevalent after the Covid-19 pandemic. After all, in the past two years the number of American adults who claimed to regularly receive news from TikTok tripled from 3% in 2020 to 10% in 2022 (Pew Research, 2022).

Ergo, since today's adolescents will be the first generation to have grown up amongst rapidly advancing technology, it is important to understand parasocial relationships' impact on their mental health and overall well-being. By researching the relationship between heightened social media use and parasocial relationships, this paper will be able to provide necessary and valuable insight into the effect of social media on adolescents.

2. Materials and Methods

Two other methods that were considered were a case study and descriptive research. However, since surveys could be used for both methods, it was important to understand the exact definition of each method. Thus, a case study seemed the most feasible since they are used to define the research question and the hypothesis and can be exploratory (Flyvbjerg, 2005). However, since they require intensive analysis of individual groups, it would be difficult to recruit participants who were willing to participate in the study. Also, conducting a case study on this topic without infringing upon ethical guidelines is relatively difficult. On account of this, and since there is no wish to infringe upon the ethics of having human participants in this study, there would have been no way to inspire students to participate in the study. Furthermore, a descriptive research method also seemed feasible since there were many options for data collection. However, the method was quite weak because conclusions of cause and effect could not be drawn. After all, this method is statistics-oriented and statistics do not prove those conclusions.

Overall, surveys are an invaluable tool for researchers since they allow researchers to gain a comprehensive overall understanding of any group's opinions on numerous topics (Ponto, 2015). In the context of this paper, which aims to explore the specific inquiry regarding the extent to which parasocial relationships are exacerbated through social media usage, a survey administered to the general public would allow for the collection of relevant data. Additionally, since the purpose of this paper is to explore a phenomenon and understand its effects on adolescents, a survey allows for the collection of general non-detail-specific data that contain open-ended responses from participants.

Furthermore, the survey simply consists of nine multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Surveys are defined as “the collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions.” (Scott & Schutt,

2012). Thus, the aim of the survey was for it to remain a quick and efficient collection of data since participants do not engage in or provide accurate and reliable data in longer surveys (Kost & Correa de Rosa, 2018). Ergo, the survey was sent to other AP Capstone and general students since there is no limitation regarding gender or class discipline. The questions consisted of what social media (Twitter, Twitch, or Tiktok) participants use more and specifics as to which celebrities they like and why. Also, some deeper questions regarding social media’s toxicity, conflict resolution in friendships, and loneliness during the Covid lockdown were asked.

Furthermore, the use of surveys aided in creating the alignment with the research question as surveys allowed the collection qualitative data and investigate relationships between individuals and social media influencers’ online personas. Collecting qualitative rather than quantitative data is beneficial as well since quantitative data is used to evaluate a problem on a numeric scale. Primarily, quantitative data is used to quantify the question and convey the answers to the “what” and “how many” parts of a research question. Qualitative data, however, is used to explore and explain ideas since it provides a deeper view into individuals’ mindsets in regard to specific events or experiences (Almalki, 2015). Moreover, investigating the specific individual and influencer relationships is important because, while the personas are not real individuals, the participant’s perceived relationships with them contain increasingly similar behavior to any typical “person-and-person” relationships (Gleason et al., 2017). Correspondingly, understanding the differing strengths of parasocial relationships and discerning the reasons why they differ allow the research question to be answered better. By having a preliminary and general understanding of how social media affects parasocial relationships, it is possible to determine what qualifies as growth towards a parasocial relationship and its typical effects.

Regarding the analysis of the data used, it was decided to code and analyze the data using thematic analysis. A study from the Ireland Journal of Higher Education aided reaching the conclusion that using open code would be the most suitable for the responses acquired (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Open coding is a data analysis process during which the researcher breaks the raw data into smaller parts and creates “codes” to label them. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis that includes reading through a set of data in order to find patterns that evolve into themes.

In conclusion, after all the options were considered, the survey appeared to have the fewest limitations. The only main problematic limitation identified was determining whether participants were lying or not when answering the questions. Regrettably, there was no viable procedure to determine whether participants lie, so the results will likely not be completely accurate. Nonetheless, in spite of this limitation, the data collected will still allow for the drawing of accurate conclusions to answer this paper’s research question.

3. Results

Upon completion of the creation of the survey, it was sent out to fellow high school-aged adolescents of any gender since parasocial relationships can occur with anyone. Eight questions were asked and below are the leading eight responses to one question.

The social media specifically investigated were Twitter, TikTok, and Twitch. When asked which of the three were used more, 71% of participants claimed to use TikTtok the most while 10% used Twitch and 5% used Twitter. Participants were also asked why they enjoyed their favorite celebrities’ content (figure 1) and

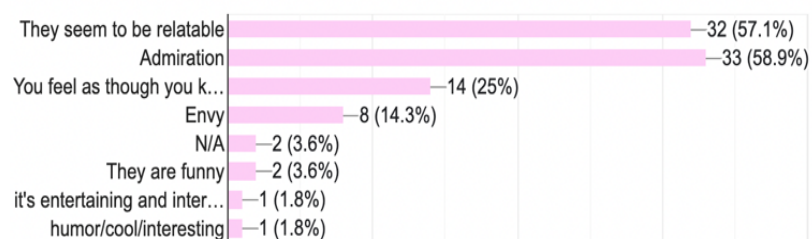


Figure 1. Why do you enjoy celebrity content?

received answers that specified that 57% enjoyed their relatability and 58% admired them alongside the 25% who felt as though they were friends with the celebrity.

It was also asked if participants had ever begun to distance themselves from friends in favor of checking a celebrity’s page (figure 2) since that would mean they were prioritizing relationships with people they do not know

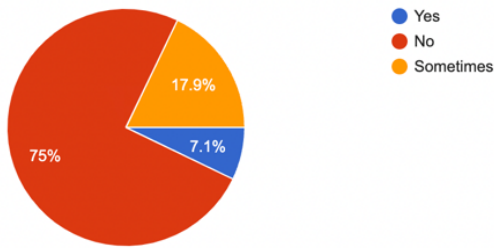


Figure 2. Have you ever distanced yourself from a friend and prioritized checking a celebrity's social media?

research as it was possible to extract specific participant answers to begin coding the data. However, it was also important that the specific influencers that participants tended to like was considered so that it was possible to factor in what platforms they typically used. Figuring out these specifications was important in order to place into consideration what platforms were used most.

Table 1. Specific influencers participants enjoy viewing.

Are there any influencers or streamers or celebrities that you specifically enjoy content from? (say 'no' if this doesn't apply)
Hank Green
Various
KSI, Sidemen, Kai Cenat
Nessa Barrett
WarOwl/n0thing
Anna Sitar
Mr.ArnabPatil
Taylor Swift and Selena Gomez
Lana Del Rey and Mitski (music), Brittnay Broski and Sarah Schauer (youtubers)

Table 2. Coding Table

Open Codes	Properties	Participant Responses
Social media allows for quick updates from celebrities/streamers	Watching of Twitch streams New TikTok uploads New Tweets	Like Lana Del Rey/Mitski for new music Enjoy Alix Earle's TikTok videos Kpop tweets Youtuber tweets
Enjoy content from celebrities	Seem relatable Admire them Envy them Feel known Funny	Feel like they know the celebrity personally Feel like friends Admiration Entertaining Envy
Potentially replace friends	Distance themselves from friends in favor of watching celebrities Do not distance themselves from friends	Streamers feel like better friends than reality Streamers cannot replace friends
Distraction during conflict	Better No real conflict	Reach streamers/celebrities at any time No confrontation
Obsession caused by loneliness	Covid lockdown Social media causes isolation	Covid lockdown caused a disconnection from friends Toxic Felt like they were living vicariously through influencers Influencers provided relatability

over real friends; a key factor of parasocial relationships. The results showed an overwhelming majority of 75% of participants did not do so. However, 18% did so sometimes, and 7% admitted to doing so in general.

The third most important question asked was if participants ever turned to influencers during the conflict with real friends (figure 3) as this would also be a key factor in being considered to have a parasocial relationship. While the majority of participants still said no, a total of 28.6% said yes and that they did so sometimes.

All three answers were quite important to the

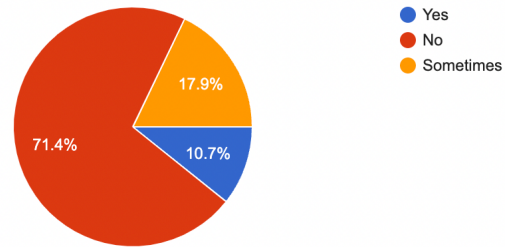


Figure 3: Do you ever turn to influencers' content while experiencing conflict with in-person friends?

4. Discussion

Included in the table below are the open codes used, their properties, and specific phrases from participants that aligned with the codes. It was important to identify the specific properties of each participant's responses because they contributed to the development of each of the codes.

Next, a thematic analysis of the open codes was conducted. The codes were then synthesized and generated to use their properties to identify the main themes that were supported through the data. Furthermore, the thematic analysis identified two main themes: social media allows for instant gratification and it can lead to distraction and obsession. Below are two theme maps (Figures 4 & 5) that display the themes broken down into the properties that they consist of.

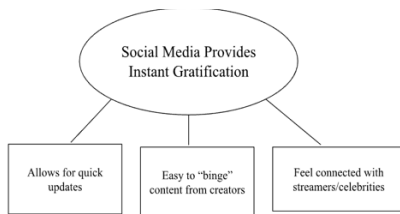


Figure 4. Theme Map 1



Figure 5. Theme Map 2

Since the research question specifically inquired about the growth of parasocial relationships due to increased social media usage, the identified themes connect to that idea. After all, the survey aided the determination of the theme that because social media provides instant gratification, teens are more likely to become addicted to it and spend an increased amount of time watching videos, streams, or checking tweets from their favorite celebrities. This leads to the feeling of connection and kinship with the celebrity that can cause teens to feel closer to these media personas. The second theme about social media causing obsession and distraction also relates well with the research question. Since the usage of social media creates a distraction for teenagers that allows them to escape from conflict and potentially aids them in coping with loneliness, any increased use of these platforms can lead to dependency. In addition to the found themes and coded data, there were several phrases stated by participants in the survey that truly depicted and emphasized the impact of social media on parasocial relationships and their mental health. One participant explained that they believed that social media could potentially create “unachievable expectations and can cause a lot of dysmorphia, especially for teenagers.” which demonstrates the clear negative impact of social media on adolescent mental health. However, another participant had believed that they “knew everyone they followed on social media and were friends with them, only because of what they post.” Thus, this statement reflects the opposite opinion of the impact of social media on mental health, but it does demonstrate how parasocial relationships begin. Overall, the specific phrases that were given by participants in the survey are able to illustrate the nuanced and complicated relationships between social media, parasocial relationships, and mental health. Though this paper does not specifically investigate adolescents' mental health, it is inferable based on the two main themes found that social media is a leading cause of adolescent mental health issues. As suggested by prior literature, PSRs often occur due mental health problems, typically ones caused by social media, that may lead to dependency, toxic obsession, and further negative effects on an individual's mental health. In this dependency or obsession, individuals are susceptible to begin relying on influencers who create content that feels relatable, causing an individual to depend entirely on an internet persona to form a PSR with.

5. Conclusion

Upon having conducted a careful analysis of the collected data and the results obtained from the thematic analysis, the data showed that increased social media usage causes the proliferation of PSRs. Adolescents increased social media use facilitates these parasocial relationships because adolescents are enabled to establish a sense of intimacy and familiarity between themselves and media personalities. These platforms allow celebrities to present a candid, “behind-the-scenes” view of their daily life, which provides viewers with the ultimate intimate details of their existence. This, in turn, reinforces the emotional connections and illusions created and then fostered by a PSR. In relation to psychology researcher, Tracy Gleason’s, conclusion regarding parasocial relationships, these intimate

glimpses that are presented further solidify the PSR. Based on her research, Gleason was able to conclude that since parasocial relationships are relationships without any chance of reciprocity, adolescents use them as a safe space to grow and develop while testing different ways of being (Gleason et al., 2017). This conclusion relates to the research because it aids in the creation of a reasonable inference regarding making the research question since it would aid the body of knowledge to have an answer to the research question. Since parasocial relationships provide safe spots for adolescents, the additional intimate views that any celebrity or influencers provide of their life would entice a viewer much more than previously. These candid glimpses would grant all imagined relationships to become more detailed and thus more specific and engaging for the adolescent.

However, there are a few limitations to the analysis of the raw data collected. Although the data collected supported a relevant and interesting trend, there are some limitations regarding the coding of the raw data. The subjective nature of data coding posed a challenge since there was only one coder. Had there been a team of coders, the data could have been viewed differently, meaning that what was interpreted could be potentially inaccurate. As such, if this study is to be replicated, then it is recommended that a team of coders view the data to ensure a much more objective and realistic interpretation. Furthermore, another issue is that manual coding is known to be prone to errors, so, it is possible that the data coded does not accurately reflect reality. To mitigate this, it is suggested utilizing an online coding software to work alongside the team of coders. Moreover, the survey alone may include some limitations. The questions created may not have been phrased in an easily interpretable way for some readers or they may not be able to capture the nuances of parasocial relationships, causing some important pieces of information to be forgotten.

Furthermore, if there were a replication of this study, it would be advised to supplement the survey with brief interviews of participants to gain a more profound understanding of adolescents' perceptions of the subject. By doing so, it would be possible to gain a deeper understanding of the correlation between social media use and parasocial relationships. Also, it is important to recall that the results of this study are not and will not be conclusive; hence, they should be viewed as a preliminary start for any further research. Therefore, future studies would be able to delve into investigating the influence of parasocial relationships on the psychological health and well-being of adolescents, rather than mainly focusing on how diverse social media platforms can contribute to the formation of parasocial relationships.

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