

Parasocial Relationships through Social Media: A Look into Modern Day Media

Consumption

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One-sided relationships fostered through media consumption are on the rise due to an ever-growing necessity to fulfill interpersonal needs through the use of social media platforms. The term was first used by Horton and Wohl (1956), who explained their theory by stating that television personas offer the media consumer a sense of intimacy by expressing themselves through verbal and non-verbal ways that seem engaging and as if addressing the audience directly in a personal manner. In other words, parasocial interaction is a “media user’s reaction to a media performer such that the media user perceives the performer as an intimate conversational partner” (Dibble et al., 2015). Despite these being one-sided moments, by giving the illusion of a real exchange, media users will perceive them as authentic. This leads to the development of the parasocial theory, which “searches to describe and explain imagined social relationships and interactions with people who are distant from us and who do not reciprocate individual communication or interest” (Stever, 2017).

The average media consumer is actively exposed to performers of all types. Extended exposure to these performers may cause many to feel a sense of intimacy with them. Everyone has the disposition to feel a sense of intimacy with a face they see often but don’t know on a personal level. For a long time, these performers could be actors, celebrities, news anchors, political figures, or, overall, well-known people who appeared on TV, magazines, radio, or others. However, recently, a new type of medium has surged and, along with it, a new type of performer, known as social media content creators. Media consumption is described as information and entertainment media taken in by an individual or group, while

social media is an ever-changing set of websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or participate in social networking. Not only can people who participate actively in the entertainment field be a target of parasocial relationships, but every single social media user runs the risk of developing or becoming part of a one-sided relationship without realizing it.

Although, parasocial relationships can be a normal occurrence. It's a natural reaction to constantly consuming a specific person's media. However, when taken to extremes, a media user can believe they have an intimate relationship with the person behind the screen. This could lead to ideation, stalking, and obsessive relational intrusion to broaden said relationships to real-life interactions. This is where an existing concern with parasocial relationships lies. Plus, with the ever-growing dependency that is currently developing on social media, this topic is relevant for modern-day communication research.

Many scholars connect the possible development of parasocial relationships to attachment theory. Developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth, this theory focuses on explaining emotional bonds and relationships between people. It suggests that people are born with a need to create bonds with caregivers as children, and these will define how attachments develop throughout life. Scholars believe that the feeling of intimacy that someone in a parasocial relationship may experience can play a role in the attachment they form towards their parasocial target.

This brings us to the uncertainty reduction theory by Charles Berger (Griffin et al., 2019), which refers to the increased knowledge of what kind of person another is through communication. This will potentially provide an improved forecast of how a future interaction will turn out. Uncertainty reduction theory connects with what is known as attribution theory, "a systematic explanation of how people draw inferences about the character of others based on observed behavior" (Griffin et al., 2019). These two theories

determine that someone can identify patterns in the way another communicates, therefore reducing uncertainty and attributing characteristics to them based on patterns. When a user consumes a performer's media, they are unconsciously noticing these patterns, predicting the way they express themselves, and attributing characteristics based on this. When a relationship is one-sided, assuming someone's character when you have never met them, while they have complete control over how they may be perceived, may be problematic.

There is also the social penetration theory (Irwin Altman & Dalmas Taylor), which is the theory that describes the “process of developing deeper intimacy with another person through mutual self-disclosure and other forms of vulnerability” (Griffin et al., 2019). Many social media influencers gain a big following due to their disposition to openly self-disclose their life on their platforms. Self-disclosure helps people gain the trust of others and, possibly, allows others to self-disclose personal details back. However, in social media, self-disclosure usually only goes one way, the content creator shares details and snippets of their life, while the media consumer, at most, comments on said information.

On the other hand, the uses and gratification approach (Griffin et al., 2019), coined by Elihu Katz, deals with understanding why people use certain types of media, what needs they have to use them, and what gratifications they get from using them. It suggests that media users play an active role in choosing and using media. We can find four categories that seek to explain this: diversion, personal relationships, personal identity, and information seeking (Zhuang, 2018). In the thesis *Parasocial Relationships with Online Influencers* (2022), Reynolds identifies some common causes for media consumption. These include enjoyment, entertainment, specific emotional responses, education, awareness, and escapism (Reynolds, 2022). The reason someone may consume media combined with possible interpersonal needs (inclusion, affection, control, relaxation, or enjoyment), may lead a user to begin following specific content creators to fulfill these needs. Many parasocial relationships may develop if a

person suffers from loneliness, isolation, rejection, self-esteem issues, or a need for homophily. Depending on why someone may consume media, how deep their lack of interpersonal fulfillment is, and what feeling they are searching to comfort, parasocial relationships and interactions become more likely to happen. For example, various studies have concluded that people with a “dispositionally” high need to belong and who experience ostracism have reported using social media as a remedy, and they use social media to follow their parasocial targets. As Reynolds (2022) states: “Social media influencers address their audiences personally and share content that entices people to continue following or interacting with them. This mutual awareness between the social media influencer and the media consumer strengthens the parasocial relationship.”

In summary, due to the self-disclosure that many influencers partake in, viewers can begin to feel closer to them; this is how these one-sided relationships may begin to form, through uncertainty reduction. Attribution then explains how viewers begin to assume the character of those who participate in social media. Media consumers’ interpersonal needs also play a role in the choosing of parasocial relationship targets. If they are searching for inclusion, control, escape, or enjoyment, then they are likely to find an influencer that may satisfy that need. A need for social acceptance or a secure attachment can connect directly with the uses and gratification approach explained above. Parasocial relationships may present themselves through extreme support or admiration for a content creator’s work, hyperawareness of their behavior, or even the acknowledgment on how they meant something to the user on a personal level. Some parasocial relationships can be lighthearted, while others should be taken seriously due to the assumptions made by viewers. Equally, some people are aware of their parasocial bonds, while others are not.

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