

The Impact of Social Anxiety and Perceived Social Support on Parasocial Relationships among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Parasocial relationships, are becoming increasingly prevalent in the digital age, particularly among young individuals who experience challenges in real-life social interactions. The present study investigates the influence of social anxiety and perceived social support on parasocial relationships in a sample of 150 young adults. A quantitative, cross-sectional design was employed using standardized self-report instruments: the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS), the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), and the Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale (CPPI). Data was analysed using Spearman's rank-order correlation and multiple regression analysis. The findings reveal a significant positive correlation between social anxiety and parasocial relationships, and a weaker but significant negative correlation between perceived social support and parasocial involvement. Multiple regression result indicates that social anxiety significantly predicts parasocial engagement, whereas perceived social support did not contribute significantly when both predictors were considered individually. These findings highlight how social anxiety plays a key role in why some individuals form strong connections with media figures. For those who struggle socially, parasocial relationships may offer a safer, substitute form of interaction.

Keywords: *Social Anxiety, Perceived Social Support, Parasocial Relationships, Young adults*

In recent years, the growing inescapable nature of digital media has fostered new forms of interpersonal connection, most notably parasocial relationships, one-sided psychological attachments individuals form with media figures such as celebrities, influencers, or fictional characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Although these relationships lack direct interaction or reciprocity, they can evoke feelings of intimacy, companionship, and emotional support, often mirroring the dynamics of real-world relationships (Giles, 2002). More and more research points to the real psychological impact of parasocial relationships, especially for people who find everyday social situations difficult. Additionally, these interactions might be found more commonly among individuals aged between 18-25 as they tend to be more active on social media.

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Among the psychological factors implicated in the development and intensity of parasocial relationships, social anxiety and perceived social support are particularly relevant.

Individuals with high levels of social anxiety may find real-life social interactions distressing and thus gravitate toward parasocial bonds, which offer emotional safety without the threat of social judgment (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). These relationships can function as substitutes for real-life social connections, fulfilling social and emotional needs that are otherwise unmet. A study by de Bérail et al. (2019) found that social anxiety is both directly and indirectly associated with YouTube addiction, with PSRs mediating this relationship. This suggests that those who experience discomfort in social interactions might seek solace in one-sided relationships with media figures, potentially leading to problematic media consumption behaviors.

In parallel, perceived social support is a critical determinant of mental health and well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985). When individuals perceive low levels of social support, they may seek alternative sources of connection, including parasocial relationships (Greenwood & Long, 2011). These one-sided relationships can offer a sense of belonging and validation, particularly in the absence of meaningful social ties. A study published in *Scientific Reports* explored the effectiveness of PSRs in fulfilling psychological needs and found that individuals perceive these relationships to be effective at fulfilling needs such as companionship and social connection (Lotun et al., 2024). This indicates that PSRs can play a role in enhancing perceived social support, particularly for those lacking sufficient real-life social interactions.

The interrelation of social anxiety and perceived social support suggests a compensatory mechanism through which parasocial relationships emerge. High social anxiety may drive individuals away from face-to-face interactions, while low perceived support may motivate them to seek emotional fulfillment elsewhere, together increasing reliance on media figures as sources of comfort. This study aims to examine the joint and independent effects of social anxiety and perceived social support on parasocial relationship formation, offering insights into the psychological mechanisms underlying these increasingly prevalent attachments.

Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are one-sided emotional bonds that individuals develop with media figures, such as celebrities, television characters, or social media influencers. These relationships, first conceptualized by Horton and Wohl in 1956, allow individuals to experience a sense of connection and intimacy with figures who remain unaware of their existence. Horton and Wohl (1956) termed the “face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer” as a parasocial relationship. In today's digital era, the prevalence of PSRs has intensified, particularly with the rise of social media platforms that facilitate direct interaction and engagement with media personalities.

Research has demonstrated that PSRs can serve as a compensation for individuals who might be experiencing social deficits. For instance, the social surrogacy hypothesis suggests that individuals suffering from social isolation may use television and other media to create pseudo-relationships with characters, thereby alleviating feelings of loneliness and social deprivation (Derrick et al., 2009). This phenomenon highlights the capability of PSRs to fulfil an individual's social requirements in the absence of in-person interactions.

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The rise of social media has reshaped the nature of parasocial relationships, making the boundaries between public figures and their followers increasingly unclear. Platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube enable direct interaction, fostering a heightened sense of intimacy and reciprocity. This accessibility can amplify the strength of PSRs, as audiences feel more connected to media figures who share personal content and engage with followers. Furthermore, the emergence of influencer culture has significantly heightened the importance of parasocial relationships (PSRs). Influencers often project authenticity and relatability, fostering strong emotional connections with their followers. This sense of belonging to a community curated by an online personality can be profoundly impactful.

PSRs can have both positive and negative psychological effects. On the positive side, they can provide companionship, reduce feelings of loneliness, and serve as a source of inspiration or motivation. However, over-reliance on PSRs may lead to social isolation, unrealistic expectations, and neglect of real-life relationships. Understanding these dynamics is crucial, especially in the context of social interaction anxiety and perceived social support. The psychological implications of these relationships, both positive and negative, have garnered increasing scholarly attention.

Social Anxiety

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is a prevalent and often debilitating mental health condition characterized by an intense, persistent fear of being negatively evaluated, judged, or humiliated in social or performance situations (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals with SAD may experience heightened distress in everyday social contexts, often leading to avoidance behaviors that significantly impair their academic, occupational, and interpersonal functioning (Stein & Stein, 2008). Typically emerging in adolescence, SAD can persist chronically if left untreated, frequently co-occurring with depression and leading to long-term emotional and social difficulties (Beesdo et al., 2007).

The intense physical symptoms experienced by those with social anxiety, combined with patterns of negative thinking, like expecting the worst or being overly self-critical, can lead people to avoid social situations. Over time, this withdrawal can impair an individual's ability to form or maintain supportive relationships, thereby compounding feelings of disconnection and psychological distress (Aderka et al., 2012).

In the context of today's increasingly digital social landscape, social anxiety has taken on new forms. While the internet may initially appear to offer a protective buffer from direct social judgment, it also introduces unique arenas of perceived social evaluation. Individuals with SAD may experience anxiety related to posting on social media, receiving online feedback, or participating in virtual meetings, phenomena now commonly referred to as "cyber social anxiety" (Weidman et al., 2012). These digital interactions may mirror the same fears of negative scrutiny and social rejection that are present in face-to-face situations (Erwin et al., 2004; Caplan, 2007).

This shifting social terrain has important implications for how socially anxious individuals seek and maintain emotional connections. One emerging pattern is the tendency to form *parasocial relationships*—one-sided psychological attachments with media figures, influencers, or fictional characters who are perceived as safe, consistent, and nonjudgmental sources of comfort (Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956). For individuals with high social anxiety, parasocial relationships may serve as an appealing alternative to real-world

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interactions, offering a low-risk way to fulfill social needs without the fear of negative evaluation. These relationships allow individuals to feel a sense of belonging and connection while bypassing the challenges associated with reciprocal social engagement (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). As such, understanding social anxiety in the digital age requires an appreciation of the compensatory mechanisms that individuals may turn to in order to cope with their unmet social needs.

Perceived Social Support

Perceived social support refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of the availability, reliability, and adequacy of emotional and instrumental assistance from their social network. It is not merely the objective presence of support, but rather the belief that one can count on others in times of need, which plays a pivotal role in mental health outcomes (Cohen & Wills, 1985). This distinction between perceived and actual support is crucial; an individual may have frequent social interactions yet still feel unsupported if those relationships are not perceived as meaningful or emotionally fulfilling (Lakey & Orehek, 2011).

The protective function of perceived support is well-documented across psychological literature. High levels of perceived social support have been consistently linked to lower rates of depression, anxiety, and stress-related disorders, as well as to greater emotional regulation and subjective well-being (Thoits, 2011). The belief in having dependable social network can give individuals a sense of security and predictability, which can lessen the effects of life stressors and increase resilience (Ozbay et al., 2007). Supportive relationships promote emotional stability, foster a sense of belonging, and improve self-esteem, key components in an individual's capacity to cope with adversity (Taylor, 2011).

However, the perception of support is not uniform across individuals. Several personal and contextual variables, such as attachment style, communication patterns, self-esteem, and cultural norms, affect how social support is interpreted and internalized (Rueger et al., 2016). For instance, individuals with high interpersonal sensitivity or fear of rejection may perceive less support than is actually available, thus limiting the benefits of their social networks (Lakey & Cassady, 1990). Moreover, the *quality* of support often outweighs the *quantity*; emotionally fulfilling, trust-based relationships tend to offer greater psychological benefits than a large number of superficial or ambiguous connections (Sarason et al., 1990).

In an increasingly digitized social world, perceived support is no longer confined to face-to-face relationships. For individuals who feel disconnected from traditional sources of support, whether due to social anxiety, geographic isolation, or strained personal relationships, digital platforms may offer alternative avenues for emotional connection. Social media communities, online support groups, and even parasocial relationships with media figures can offer a sense of understanding, empathy, and belonging (Naslund et al., 2016; Baek et al., 2013). Parasocial bonds, in particular, may provide a form of perceived support that feels safe, nonjudgmental, and emotionally validating, especially for those who find real-world interactions emotionally taxing. In this context, the perceived availability of a caring presence, even in a one-sided or imagined format, can meaningfully contribute to a person's sense of emotional support and resilience.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the relationship and impact of social anxiety and perceived social support on parasocial relationships among young adults.

Objectives

- To assess the relationship between social anxiety and parasocial relationships among young adults.
- To assess the relationship between perceived social support and parasocial relationships among young adults.

Hypotheses

1. There will be a significant positive relationship between social anxiety and parasocial relationships among young adults.
2. There will be a significant negative relationship between perceived social support and parasocial relationships among young adults.
3. Social anxiety will significantly predict parasocial relationships among young adults.
4. Perceived social support will significantly predict parasocial relationships among young adults.

Sample & Its Selection

- Young adults in the age range of 18-25 were selected. (n=150).
- The sampling method used was Convenience sampling.
- Inclusion Criteria: Individuals between the ages of 18 & 25 who are willing to participate.
- Exclusion criteria: Individuals who are unable to offer informed consent.

Description of the Tools Employed

1. **Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (Mattick & Clarke, 1998)**- The Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS) was developed by Mattick and Clarke in 1998. It is a self-report measure to assess anxiety related specifically to social interactions, such as meeting new people or engaging in conversations. It is a 20-item scale that uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (Not at all characteristic) to 4 (Extremely characteristic). Total scores range from 0 to 80 and higher scores indicate greater social interaction anxiety.
2. **Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988)**- The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) was developed by Zimet et al. in 1988. It is a widely used self-report questionnaire designed to assess an individual's perceived social support from three specific sources: family, friends, and significant other. It is a 12-item scale using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Very strongly disagree) to 7 (Very strongly agree). Higher scores indicate greater level of perceived social support.
3. **Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale (Bocarnea and Brown, 2007)**- The Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale was developed by Bocarnea and Brown in 2007. It is a self-report instrument to assess the strength and nature of a person's parasocial relationship with a celebrity or media figure. It is a 20-item scale with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicate stronger parasocial relationships.

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Procedure

Young adults within the age range of 18-25 were randomly selected. Data was collected with the help of a structured questionnaire via Google Forms. Participants were recruited in-person as well as through social media platforms. Informed consent was obtained by each and every participant and only those who volunteered to participate were included. Participants then completed the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale, the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, and the Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale. The survey was anonymous to ensure confidentiality of the participants and encourage honest responses. All participants were treated ethically in accordance with research guidelines. No identifying information was collected, and participants were free to withdraw at any point.

Statistical Analysis

The data was analysed using IBM SPSS software. The following analysis were conducted-

- 1. Descriptive Statistics:** Mean and Standard deviation of all the study variables were calculated to identify any patterns and trends in the data.
- 2. Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation:** This non-parametric test was selected due to the absence of normality in the data collected. It was used to determine the strength and direction of association between the independent variables (social anxiety and perceived social support) and the dependent variable (parasocial relationships).
- 3. Multiple Regression Analysis:** This was conducted to assess the predictive power of the independent variables (social anxiety and perceived social support) on the dependent variable (parasocial relationships).

RESULT

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Study Variables

Variables	Social Anxiety	Perceived Social Support	Parasocial relationships
1. Social Anxiety	1	-	-
2. Perceived Social Support	-.494**	1	-
3. Parasocial relationships	.331**	-.170*	1
Mean	34.71	4.92	56.72
Standard Deviation	17.06	1.36	14.89

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 1 represents the descriptive statistics and Spearman's rank-order correlations between the variables. The mean and standard deviation of social anxiety, perceived social support, and parasocial relationships are indicated. The correlation between social anxiety and parasocial relationships ($\rho = .331$) indicated a positive relationship significant at the .01 level. The correlation between perceived social support and parasocial relationships ($\rho = -.170$) indicated a negative relationship significant at the .05 level. The correlation between social anxiety and perceived social support ($\rho = -.494$) indicated a negative relationship significant at the .01 level.

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Table 2 Multiple Regression Analysis predicting Parasocial relationships

Dependent Variable	R	R²	F	Sig.	Predictor	Beta	t	Sig.
Parasocial Relationships	.372	.139	11.823	.000b	Social Anxiety	.342	3.832	.000
					Perceived Social Support	-.054	-.608	.544

Table 2 presents the results of multiple regression analysis. The overall model was statistically significant ($R = .372$, $R^2 = .139$, $F = 11.823$, $p < .001$), indicating that the independent variables explained a significant proportion of variance in the dependent variable. When examining individual predictors, social anxiety emerged as a significant and positive predictor ($\beta = .342$, $t = 3.832$, $p < .001$) while perceived social support did not significantly predict parasocial relationships in the regression model ($\beta = -0.054$, $t = -0.608$, $p = .544$).

DISCUSSION

The present study explored the impact of social anxiety and perceived social support on parasocial relationships, which are one-sided emotional bonds individuals form with media figures. In an increasingly digital and media-saturated world, parasocial relationships have garnered attention for their potential role in fulfilling social and emotional needs, particularly among individuals facing interpersonal difficulties (Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956). These relationships can serve as substitutes for real-life interactions, providing a sense of connection in the absence of reciprocal engagement (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019).

A significant positive correlation was found between social anxiety and parasocial relationships ($\rho = .331$, $p < .01$), suggesting that individuals with higher levels of social anxiety are more likely to engage in parasocial bonding. This finding supports theories that parasocial relationships offer a psychologically safe space for those who find real-life social interactions distressing or overwhelming (Greenwood & Long, 2009). Media figures present a controlled and non-threatening form of social connection, which may be particularly appealing to individuals who fear judgment or rejection in real-world settings (Derrick et al., 2009).

The correlation between perceived social support and parasocial relationships was negative and significant ($\rho = -.170$, $p < .05$). This seems to align with earlier research highlighting the compensatory nature of parasocial bonds. Specifically, individuals with lower levels of real-world social support often turn to parasocial relationships as alternative sources of emotional connection (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009).

A significant negative correlation was observed between social anxiety and perceived social support ($\rho = -.494$, $p < .01$), indicating that those who experience higher social anxiety tend to perceive lower levels of support from their social environment. This aligns with research showing that socially anxious individuals often report difficulty in accessing or recognizing available social support, potentially due to distorted cognitive appraisals (La Greca & Lopez, 1998).

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To further examine the predictive power of these variables, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. This model allowed for the investigation of the unique and combined contributions of social anxiety and perceived support in predicting parasocial relationship scores. The model was statistically significant, $F(2, 147) = 11.823$, $p < .001$, with an R of .372 and an R^2 of .139, indicating that approximately 13.9% of the variance in parasocial involvement was explained by the two predictors. While this effect size is modest, it is meaningful within social and psychological research, where behaviors are typically influenced by multiple interacting factors (Cohen, 1988).

Importantly, social anxiety emerged as a significant and positive predictor ($\beta = .342$, $t = 3.832$, $p < .001$). This means that even when controlling for perceived social support, social anxiety independently contributed to the prediction of parasocial behavior. These findings strongly support the social compensation hypothesis, which proposes that socially anxious individuals may form parasocial attachments as a means of fulfilling emotional needs in a low-risk environment (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006). Parasocial interactions do not require reciprocation or social performance, making them especially attractive for individuals who struggle with real-life social demands (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011).

In contrast, perceived social support was not a significant predictor in the regression model ($\beta = -.054$, $t = -0.608$, $p = .544$), despite its earlier significant correlation with parasocial engagement. While perceived support may appear to influence parasocial behavior in isolation, its impact diminishes when social anxiety is taken into account. One interpretation is that perceived support influences parasocial involvement indirectly through its association with anxiety (Lim et al., 2016). That is, people may feel supported but still be too anxious to engage in reciprocal relationships, leading them to seek one-sided alternatives.

This pattern underscores that it is not merely the absence of support but the presence of internal barriers, such as anxiety, that drive individuals toward parasocial relationships. From a theoretical perspective, this strengthens the argument that parasocial connections are less about lacking others and more about psychological readiness or capacity to engage with them. Together, the results of this study support the social compensation hypothesis and highlight the need to consider both internal and external psychosocial factors when examining parasocial behavior. While perceived social support may provide a buffering effect for general well-being, it is social anxiety that appears to exert the most direct and influential role in shaping parasocial engagement.

To conclude, the hypotheses of the present study were partially supported by the statistical analyses conducted. Evidence for a significant correlation between social anxiety and parasocial relationships among young adults was found, as demonstrated by a significant positive Spearman correlation coefficient ($\rho = .331$, $p < .01$), leading to acceptance of the first hypothesis. Similarly, the hypothesized association between parasocial relationships and perceived social support was also backed, but the relationship was less robust ($\rho = -.170$, $p < .05$). In addition, multiple regression analysis confirmed the hypothesis that social anxiety was a significant predictor of parasocial relationships, with social anxiety being categorized as a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .342$, $p < .001$). However, perceived social support was not found to be a significant predictor of parasocial relationships ($\beta = -.054$, $p = .544$). Although there was a significant bivariate correlation, it did not contribute significantly to the prediction of parasocial involvement when social anxiety was included in the regression

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model analysis. Therefore, while the first, second, and third hypothesis were accepted, the fourth hypothesis was rejected.

Implications

The current research offers a valuable perspective on the psychological components influencing parasocial relationships, emphasizing the crucial role of social anxiety and the subtle influence of perceived social support. Parasocial relationships may act as compensatory mechanisms for individuals who experience difficulties with social interactions, based on the strong predictive power of social anxiety. This has important clinical implications, as media-based bonds may reflect underlying social fears and avoidance behaviours. Mental health professionals should consider evaluating parasocial involvement with respect to socially anxious clients, as it may reflect deeper emotional needs for connection. Despite perceived social support's lack of significant predictivity for parasocial involvement, its negative correlation with social anxiety and parasocial relationships suggests that it is still relevant. Low levels of support may indirectly promote parasocial behaviour, as it may increase vulnerability to anxiety and social withdrawal. Therefore, interventions should not solely focus on reducing anxiety but also aim to improve people's perceived access to supportive social circles.

To conclude, this study demonstrates that parasocial relationships are not just a passive or secondary phenomenon, but also have sway over the emotional and social lives of individuals, particularly those with psychological vulnerabilities. Additionally, recognizing and addressing the drivers and consequences of these relationships is crucial in both clinical and social endeavours to promote mental well-being in an increasingly media-driven world.

Limitations

Despite its insights and contributions, the present study does have several limitations that should be considered. Firstly, the non-normal distribution of data required the use of a non-parametric test, Spearman's rank order correlation, which while appropriate may have limited statistical power and restricted generalizability. Second, the wider applicability and generalisation of the results is limited due to the homogeneity of samples. The inclusion of a more diverse sample across age, culture, and socioeconomic background in future research is necessary to enhance the external validity of the study. In addition, the study relies solely on measures of self-report which could present opportunities for bias and subjective interpretation. Behavioural assessments or qualitative methods like interviews or observations may be incorporated in future research to obtain an expanded understanding. Further, the cross-sectional design of the present study doesn't account for cause-effect relationship. Longitudinal studies are recommended as they can be used to track changes over time and determine whether social anxiety, for example, directly affects parasocial tendencies or if other variables are part of larger picture. Lastly, the research did not investigate potential mediators or moderators, such as loneliness, personality, attachment style, and media usage patterns, that could influence involvement in parasocial relationships.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to investigate the impact of social anxiety and perceived social support on parasocial relationships among young adults. The findings of the present study contribute meaningfully to our understanding of parasocial relationships and their psychological underpinnings. Specifically, the study demonstrates that social anxiety plays a prominent role in predicting parasocial involvement, supporting the notion that individuals

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with difficulties in real-world social interactions may rely more heavily on one-sided media relationships. This provides evidence for the compensatory function of parasocial relationships and opens the door for further investigation into the emotional and psychological needs they fulfil.

Social anxiety significantly and positively predicted parasocial relationships, indicating that individuals with higher levels of social anxiety are more inclined toward forming one-sided bonds with media figures. These individuals may use parasocial relationships to meet social and emotional needs in a way that feels safer or more accessible than face-to-face interactions. Perceived social support, while significantly negatively correlated with parasocial engagement, did not significantly predict parasocial involvement in the regression analysis. This suggests that although individuals who perceive higher levels of social support may be less likely to engage in parasocial behavior, this relationship is not as robust or reliable once anxiety is considered. It is possible that perceived support plays a more complex role, perhaps interacting with other variables such as loneliness, attachment style, or media habits.

The results align with existing literature on media psychology, particularly research suggesting that parasocial interactions can serve as emotional regulators for individuals who feel isolated or socially anxious. These findings also have practical implications. For instance, educators, counselors, and mental health professionals should consider the role of parasocial engagement as both a potential coping mechanism and a sign of underlying social or emotional challenges. While parasocial relationships can be comforting and affirming, excessive reliance on them may also limit real-world social development.

Additionally, the findings raise important questions for future research. Longitudinal studies could explore how parasocial relationships evolve over time in relation to changing levels of anxiety or social support. It would also be beneficial to examine other predictors, such as loneliness, self-esteem, or media exposure, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of parasocial behavior.

In conclusion, this study underscores the significant role that social anxiety plays in shaping parasocial engagement. While perceived social support has a negative relationship with parasocial behavior, its predictive power appears secondary to that of anxiety. The research emphasizes the need to view parasocial interactions not merely as entertainment or fandom, but as psychological phenomena with meaningful implications for individual well-being. Understanding the reasons behind the formation of parasocial relationships can aid in the formation of interventions that support healthier social functioning and emotional coping strategies in individuals who experience social anxiety or isolation.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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