

Research Paper

Social Media Use and Parasocial Attachment: A Correlational Study of Young Adults' Celebrity Interactions

Anannya Saikia^{1*}, Dr. Rajat Kanti Mitra²

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the association between parasocial relationships (PSRs) and social media usage among young adults within a post-COVID digital environment. Utilizing a correlational research design, participants (N=120) completed the Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale (CPPI) and the Celebrity-Persona Identification Scale (CPI), in addition to providing information regarding their daily social media use, preferred platforms, types of celebrities followed, and online engagement behaviors (such as liking, commenting, and sharing). Contrary to initial hypotheses, the findings revealed no statistically significant correlation between social media usage and the strength of PSRs on either scale. However, a strong positive correlation was observed between CPPI and CPI scores, suggesting consistency between interaction-based and identification-based parasocial tendencies. While gender differences were not statistically significant, males reported marginally higher CPI scores. Furthermore, no significant differences in PSR strength were identified across various digital engagement behaviors. These results imply that the development of parasocial relationships may be more heavily influenced by internal psychological factors rather than the frequency or type of social media use, offering valuable insights into one-sided relationships within digital communication contexts.

Keywords: *parasocial relationships, young adults, CPPI, CPI, social media usage, gender differences, digital engagement, post-COVID*

In a time where technology flourishes and nearly everything can be accessed with a simple click, it has become very easy to learn all about the celebrities you admire. The way famous people and their fans interact has changed a lot. Nowadays, watching videos of a favorite YouTuber, listening to a musical artist, or even liking a character from a beloved show can create a sense of real connection. It starts to feel as if you know them intimately, even if your knowledge is solely from a screen, or it might seem as though they are your friends, despite their lack of awareness of your existence.

A noteworthy psychological phenomenon that has arisen in this landscape is the concept of **parasocial relationships (PSR)**. PSRs denote one-sided, frequently idealized connections that people establish with media figures, celebrities, or fictional characters. These

¹Student, Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Noida

²Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Noida

*Corresponding Author

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relationships involve emotional attachments that are not mutually reciprocated, and they are best recognized as substantial bonds with media figures that persist despite an unmistakable gap. Such psychological experiences can manifest on both individual and collective levels. Even though the celebrity or character does not know about you, the feelings can still be very real and strong. You can have these kinds of connections with living celebrities, characters from stories, or even with imaginary or non-human figures.

A related term is **parasocial interactions** which is a process that has been described by many psychologists such as Freud (1922), who defined it as “the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person.” This refers to a kind of mediated engagement that can stem from continuous or repeated exposure to real or imagined media and public figures. These interactions happen because people frequently see or hear about these figures through media. They don't just passively watch; they think about what they see and hear. Sometimes, these feelings make people want to imitate the values or behaviors of the celebrities they admire. But interestingly, people can also feel close to a celebrity without wanting to copy them at all (Matviuk, 2006).

Overall, parasocial relationships are complex. Even though they are one-sided, they can create strong feelings of familiarity, admiration, and attachment that feel very real. This raises important questions about how social media and modern ways of connecting are changing our social lives and emotional experiences.

Social media platforms provide the potential for PSRs to positively influence various aspects of users' well-being, although negative outcomes may also arise. On social media, PSRs can encourage healthy behaviors and attitudes while reducing health-related stigma, but they may also harm mental health through unfavourable self-comparisons. Additionally, PSRs can enhance feelings of belonging and community, aid in coping mechanisms, support personal growth and identity exploration, and diminish prejudice through parasocial contact.

With the growing visibility and accessibility of celebrities on social media, PSRs have become more common, especially among young adults who regularly use these platforms. Adolescents and young adults are especially susceptible to parasocial influences because they are in a phase of identity formation. Klimmt et al. (2013) discovered that individuals within these age groups are inclined to adopt the personality traits, values, and social behaviors exhibited by media figures. During significant transitional phases in life, parasocial relationships can help fill emotional voids by offering guidance, comfort, and motivation. Nevertheless, these influences can also lead to unrealistic self-expectations or skewed perceptions of social norms, particularly when the media figures represent unattainable ideals.

The "**third-person effect**" proposed by Davison (1983) suggests that we often underestimate the influence that media has on us, which includes our recognition of PSRs. Frequently, individuals attempt to differentiate some PSRs from others by asserting that relationships with politicians are logical, necessary, and significant, while those with entertainment figures or fictional characters are generally seen as trivial and easily disposable.

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Defining Parasocial Relationships

The term **parasocial relationship** was introduced by **Horton** and **Wohl** in the 1950s, first seen in a paper in a psychiatric journal. The term was introduced to describe the illusion of a face-to-face relationship between a media consumer and a media persona. These relationships arise from **parasocial interactions (PSIs)**, which refer to the perceived direct exchanges that people have while engaging with media content.

These connections are defined by a sense of closeness, emotional involvement, and reliability, even when they are one-sided and take place through digital interfaces. As time has passed, the idea has expanded to encompass influencers, streamers, and online creators whose lives are prominently displayed and easily reachable through various digital platforms (Giles, 2002).

Although PSRs were initially examined in relation to television, they are now being increasingly established through interactive, real-time platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok (Chung & Cho, 2017). These platforms amplify the sense of reciprocity by allowing users to like, comment on, or share content, thus enhancing the perceived intimacy between the audience and the celebrity (Tsiotsou, 2015).

These relationships are unidirectional, where the individual develops feelings of closeness, affection, or admiration for the media figure, who remains unaware of the individual's presence. They typically arise from ongoing exposure to various media channels (such as television, films, social networks, etc.). The media figure often provides a stable, familiar presence, which can create a sense of authenticity and personal connection.

Individuals engaged in parasocial relationships may have intense emotional responses to media figures, experiencing happiness, sadness, or frustration depending on the figure's behavior, public image, or narrative arcs. Although there is no genuine interaction between the person and the media personality, parasocial relationships can mimic social engagement. For instance, individuals might converse with the television or participate in online communities focused on the media figure.

Parasocial Identification

Parasocial identification occurs when individuals see aspects of themselves in media figures, leading to a deeper psychological bond beyond emotional ties. Burke (1969) notes that identification happens when one aligns with another's interests.

Unlike general parasocial interaction, which focuses on perceived relationships, identification involves incorporating a celebrity's traits, values, and behaviors into one's self-concept (Cohen, 2001). This is especially impactful for young adults in crucial identity formation stages, who may look to relatable figures for guidance (Bond & Calvert, 2014). Social media amplifies this identification through constant exposure and perceived authenticity, particularly when celebrities share personal stories (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). Thus, parasocial identification is a key avenue for exploring identity and social learning online.

Theoretical Frameworks

Parasocial relationships are based on various psychological theories that shed light on how they form, evolve, and exert influence. A key framework in this area is **attachment theory**

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(Bowlby, 1969), which suggests that humans have a natural tendency to establish emotional connections for security and comfort. In the realm of PSRs, those who feel insecure in their real-life relationships—or have unfulfilled attachment needs—may look to media figures as substitute attachment figures.

Another essential explanation comes from **uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973)**. This theory asserts that individuals actively pursue media content to satisfy specific psychological requirements, such as entertainment, companionship, information, identity reinforcement, or emotional regulation. In this context, PSRs develop because celebrities provide content and personas that fulfill these needs in a personally significant manner.

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) introduces an important behavioral aspect by emphasizing how individuals model behaviors they observe in media. According to this theory, people watch, internalize, and sometimes replicate the attitudes, values, and actions of media figures they admire. Finally, **social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)** helps explain how media figures can enhance a viewer's sense of belonging and group identification. When individuals connect with a celebrity embodying a certain lifestyle or ideology, they may integrate that persona into their own identity.

Together, these frameworks illustrate that PSRs are not merely passive or superficial experiences but are fundamentally grounded in psychological processes that drive human behavior, identity formation, and social interactions.

Social Media Usage and Post COVID-19 Trends

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed social interactions and media consumption, driving people to digital platforms for connection and entertainment due to the lockdowns. This resulted in increased social media use, especially among young adults, who engaged more with content creators and celebrities (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Parasocial relationships deepened during this time, as the pandemic's uncertainty made such connections more comforting. Celebrities who shared relatable experiences or provided virtual companionship saw heightened engagement and emotional investment from their followers (Pittman & Reich, 2020).

Digital intimacy increased as influencers and celebrities shared their personal lives, creating a stronger sense of familiarity and reciprocity. For many, these parasocial connections replaced disrupted social networks, fulfilling emotional needs during isolation (Liu & Suh, 2021).

Post-pandemic, these media behaviors remain prevalent, with social media continuing to facilitate celebrity interactions and parasocial attachments influencing digital engagement. Understanding the relationship between social media usage, pandemic-induced changes, and parasocial dynamics is essential for evaluating their effects on psychological well-being and identity formation.

Formation of Parasocial Bonds and Influencing Factors

Parasocial relationships often start with repeated exposure to a media figure, allowing the individual to cultivate a sense of familiarity, attraction, and emotional connection. Unlike conventional interpersonal relationships, parasocial bonds are one-sided and do not require

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any reciprocation from the celebrity or persona. Nevertheless, these connections can be felt with as much intensity and personal significance as real-life relationships, especially when fostered through ongoing engagement.

Various factors contribute to the strength and growth of parasocial relationships. One of the most important is the **frequency and length of media exposure**. Consistent and extended interaction with a celebrity's content, particularly on highly engaging platforms such as Instagram or YouTube, enhances the illusion of closeness and encourages emotional investment (Bond, 2018).

The **perceived authenticity** of the celebrity also significantly influences these interactions. Audiences are more inclined to develop strong parasocial relationships with celebrities who seem "genuine," relatable, or vulnerable, often showcased through behind-the-scenes content or candid posts. The more a celebrity shares personal experiences, the more likely followers are to feel a true connection (Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

The **kind of media platform** employed also affects parasocial attachment. Visual platforms that allow for direct engagement, such as live streams, Q&A sessions, and comment sections, generally promote stronger connections compared to more passive media formats. These interactive features foster a sense of conversation and responsiveness, enhancing the perceived reciprocity of the relationship.

Demographic and psychological elements further influence the likelihood and depth of parasocial engagement. Factors such as age, personality traits (like introversion, loneliness, or low self-esteem), and social anxiety have been identified as predictors of the intensity of parasocial relationships (Greenwood & Long, 2009). Furthermore, **identity relevance**—how closely an individual's values or aspirations align with those of the celebrity—can strengthen the bond.

Lastly, the **type of celebrity** can shape the nature of the parasocial relationship. For example, fans of influencers or lifestyle vloggers may feel more personal connections due to the perceived normalcy and accessibility of these figures, compared to fans of traditional movie stars or musicians, who are often regarded as more distant and idealized.

Digital Engagement Patterns

Digital engagement includes a range of actions through which people connect with celebrities online, varying from **passive consumption** (viewing and scrolling) to more **active involvement** such as commenting, sharing, and creating fan-made content. These engagement types not only showcase existing parasocial relationships (PSRs) but also actively strengthen them, establishing a feedback loop where heightened interaction intensifies emotional connections, which then stimulates further engagement (Tsiotsou, 2015; Lee & Watkins, 2016). Research indicates that higher-effort interactions—such as sending direct messages or producing content—tend to promote stronger parasocial bonds compared to low-effort actions like scrolling or liking (Click et al., 2013).

Consequently, digital engagement serves as both a behavioral signal and a psychological process in fostering parasocial attachment.

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Psychological and Behavioral Impacts of Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) profoundly influence emotional experiences, social behaviors, and identity, particularly for adolescents and young adults. Positively, they can provide companionship and emotional support for those socially isolated, stabilizing individuals during transitions, reducing anxiety, and enhancing self-worth when media figures embody admired traits (Tukachinsky, 2011).

PSRs can also shape behaviour in meaningful ways. Audiences frequently mimic the behaviors, lifestyle decisions, and purchasing habits of celebrities they admire. This phenomenon can be seen in areas ranging from fashion styles and political views to professional goals and health practices. For example, a young individual who avidly tracks a fitness influencer may start following comparable exercise regimens or dietary plans, feeling that their connection lends authority to the influencer's suggestions.

Conversely, excessive PSR involvement can foster emotional dependency, leading to social withdrawal as online connections overshadow real relationships. This can create idealized self-images, body image issues, and unrealistic expectations in personal interactions, especially when celebrities showcase unattainable lifestyles (Stever & Lawson, 2013).

Furthermore, PSRs can function as echo chambers, reinforcing beliefs and behaviors without challenge, particularly when figures promote harmful ideologies or consumerism or partake in dangerous activities. Thus, the impact of PSRs is complex, presenting both developmental advantages and psychological risks depending on their context, intensity, and nature.

Gender Differences in Parasocial Attachments

Gender significantly influences the ways in which parasocial relationships (PSRs) are formed and experienced. Research consistently indicates that women tend to establish emotionally intimate and long-lasting PSRs more frequently than men. These relationships are often characterized by empathy, nurturing behaviors, and a profound sense of interpersonal closeness (Theran et al., 2010).

On the other hand, men may be more inclined to engage in PSRs that are aspirational or based on admiration, often aligning with public figures they view as powerful, successful, or representative of traditional masculine ideals. While emotional intimacy can still be present, it is frequently expressed through mimicry or alignment with certain ideologies rather than through overt affection.

Social norms and gender expectations surrounding emotional expression likely contribute to these differences. Women are generally socialized to prioritize emotional intimacy and connection, whereas men may face discouragement in expressing vulnerability. Nevertheless, recent developments in media content and celebrity culture are beginning to challenge these norms, leading to more varied representations and forms of celebrity engagement across different gender identities.

These gender-based trends underscore the importance of considering demographic factors in the examination of PSRs. Gaining a deeper understanding of how gender influences emotional investment, media preferences, and online engagement styles can provide valuable insights into the psychological mechanisms involved.

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Research Gap and Study Justification

A growing body of literature examines parasocial relationships and their psychological underpinnings; however, there is a scarcity of studies that connect these constructs with specific social media behaviors, particularly in the context following the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, research on the impact of demographic factors, such as gender, on parasocial identification and online interactions remains limited. This study seeks to address these gaps by integrating two validated parasocial scales with measures of digital engagement, thereby providing insights into the ways emotional connections with celebrities are expressed in online behaviors and social media routines.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The study of parasocial relationships (PSRs) and parasocial interactions (PSIs) originated with **Horton and Wohl (1956)**, who described how audiences form imagined relationships with media figures. **Tukachinsky and Stever (2019)** demonstrated that, with the increasing prevalence of social media, perceptions of intimacy and reciprocity within relationships have strengthened, facilitated by features such as direct messaging and story interactions. These affordances contribute to a **blurring of the boundaries** between mediated interactions and in-person relationships.

In early developmental contexts, **Gleason et al. (2017)** revealed that adolescents form distinct types of PSRs based on gender—boys often saw celebrities as mentors, while girls viewed them as friends. This is echoed in **Bond's (2016)** research, which found that **direct engagement** on Twitter (e.g., retweets, replies) intensified PSRs among young people. The influence of **identity alignment** and **media exposure** has also been highlighted; **Rosaen and Dibble (2017)** and **Su et al. (2021)** demonstrated that self-disclosure and interpersonal attraction significantly predict stronger parasocial bonds and increase trust in influencers, thereby influencing audience behavior.

Chung and Cho (2014) found that reality TV and SNS interactions amplify PSRs, which enhance endorser and brand credibility. They emphasized **self-disclosure as a key driver** of this connection, showing that it strengthens perceptions of authenticity and diminishes psychological distance. Similarly, **Lacap et al. (2023)** confirmed that social media interactions fuel self-disclosure, which in turn mediates stronger PSRs and ultimately contributes to brand credibility and loyalty.

A growing body of literature has examined PSRs in the influencer economy. **Aw and Chuah (2021)** emphasized that attributes like prestige and attractiveness strengthen PSRs, but warned that over-commercialization may reduce purchase intention. **Koay et al. (2023)** challenged the assumption that PSRs always mediate influencer marketing effectiveness; while self-disclosure was important, it was the congruence between the consumer and influencer that moderated PSR development and its influence on purchase intent. **Su et al. (2021)** found that **social, physical, and task attraction all contributed** to PSR development, which increased perceived credibility and reduced risk in purchase decisions. Meanwhile, **Sokolova and Perez (2021)** showed that PSRs with fitness influencers led to greater health-related behavioral intentions, especially when identification with the influencer was high.

The emotional dimension of PSRs has been explored through affective outcomes. **Stein et al. (2022)** demonstrated that recalling parasocial friendships elevated mood comparably to

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real-life relationships, although such recollections did not reduce loneliness. **Tatem and Ingram (2022)** added that social media dependence—not social anxiety—was a key predictor of emotional PSRs, highlighting how emotional reliance on media figures may substitute for interpersonal bonds.

Recent work has considered the longevity and potential volatility of PSRs. **Breves et al. (2021)** demonstrated through two studies that PSRs lower resistance to persuasion and increase brand trustworthiness, especially in followers. Conversely, **Mardon et al. (2023)** examined how PSRs can turn negative, leading to anti-fan behaviors when influencer disclosures are perceived as insincere. This shift was attributed to the loss of mutual interaction and heightened fame, which reduces reciprocity.

Farivar et al. (2024) added nuance by showing that perceived disengagement ability moderates the relationship between PSRs and threat perception. When followers felt unable to psychologically disengage, stronger PSRs were linked to heightened threat appraisal—suggesting a potential emotional cost of parasocial dependence. **Maheeya and Head (2024)** similarly found that compulsive social media use intensified PSRs but weakened their quality, revealing mental health implications and the spillover of PSR behaviors across platforms.

Platform dynamics have also come under scrutiny. **Xu et al. (2023)** found that while micro-celebrities were perceived as more reciprocal than mainstream celebrities, they were rated lower on authenticity and intimacy—suggesting that mass visibility may paradoxically enhance emotional connection. Additionally, **Frederick et al. (2017)** found that even negative interactions, such as criticism or disputes between NBA athletes and fans on Twitter, could intensify PSRs, especially in male-dominated contexts.

In eco-behavioral contexts, **Breves and Liebers (2022)** revealed that followers of green-promoting influencers were more receptive to environmental messages due to the affective motivations attributed to the influencer. This further confirmed that parasocial closeness can shape message interpretation and consumer intentions.

The Indian literature on PSRs is still emerging. **Mehta and Bapu KG (2023)** found that while PSRs positively correlated with intolerance of uncertainty, they had no link to loneliness, suggesting that such bonds help users manage ambiguity rather than substitute social needs. **Ravi and Patki (2025)** observed no strong relationship between PSRs and well-being, but noted their coexistence with offline relationships. Meanwhile, **Agnihotri and Bhattacharya (2020)** concluded that Indian consumers formed stronger PSRs with mainstream celebrities than influencers, attributing this to perceptions of higher status and wealth. **Saggar (2021)** warned that increased social media engagement correlated negatively with self-esteem and social connectedness among Indian youth, highlighting the potential costs of parasocial immersion.

Taken together, these studies confirm that PSRs are shaped by demographic, emotional, and technological factors. They influence not only consumer behavior and brand perception but also psychological outcomes such as mood, anxiety, and identity. As social media continues to mediate daily life, understanding PSRs is essential to grasping the evolving interplay between digital engagement and emotional attachment to media figures.

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Despite these important contributions, few Indian studies have explored PSRs beyond consumer or psychological outcomes. Specifically, the relationship between PSR strength and digital engagement patterns (e.g., time spent on social media, platform usage, and interaction types) remains under-examined. There is also limited understanding of how demographic variables like gender, or the nature of interaction (liking, commenting, sharing) with celebrities, shape parasocial intensity within the Indian youth population.

Furthermore, cross-cultural nuances remain under-theorized. Many Indian youths consume both global and regional celebrity content, potentially influencing the types of PSRs they form and how they engage digitally. However, most Indian studies have not differentiated between celebrity types (actors, influencers, musicians) or explored platform-specific dynamics—a gap that this dissertation aims to address.

This research seeks to fill these gaps by:

1. **Measuring the strength of parasocial relationships** using established scales (Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale and Celebrity-Persona Identification Scale)
2. Examining the **association between PSR strength and social media usage**
3. Exploring **gender differences** in parasocial relationship strength
4. Identifying which celebrity types (e.g., influencer, actor, musician) are most associated with strong PSRs
5. Assessing how online interaction types (liking, commenting, sharing) influence parasocial bonding.

By focusing on the **post-COVID digital behavior of Indian youth**, this study adds to the growing body of literature that positions PSRs not only as a psychological or consumer phenomenon but also as a **cultural and behavioral construct embedded in daily digital practices**.

METHOD

Hypotheses

1. **H1:** There will be a **positive correlation** between social media usage and the strength of parasocial relationships.
2. **H2:** **Women** will report **stronger parasocial relationships** compared to men.
3. **H3:** Individuals who engage in more **interactive behaviors** (e.g., commenting, sharing) will score higher on parasocial relationship scales than those who passively consume content.

Participants

The study included a total of 120 participants, consisting of 60 men and 60 women, aged between 18 and 30 years ($M = 22.4$, $SD = 2.9$). Participants were recruited through convenience sampling via online university groups and social media platforms. Inclusion criteria required that participants be at least 18 years old, active social media users and familiar with at least one public celebrity or influencer. All participants provided informed consent prior to the participation. The study was approved by the university's authorities and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process.

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Materials

Parasocial Relationship Measures

Two validated scales were used to measure the strength of parasocial relationships:

Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale (CPPI) (Bocarnea & Brown, 2007):

This 20-item scale measures how media consumers form parasocial relationships with celebrities or popular fictional characters/measures the perceived one-sided interpersonal relationship individuals feel with a celebrity or media figure. Participants rated statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The CPPI has demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > .85$) as well as good criterion-related validity and satisfactory construct validity.

Celebrity-Persona Identification Scale (CPI) (Brown & Bocarnea, 2007): This 20-item scale assesses emotional identification and psychological connection with a celebrity. Items were rated on the same 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). This scale has also shown strong reliability in previous research (Cronbach's $\alpha > .87$). Construct and criterion-related validity has been supported in studies by Bocarnea (2001), Brown, Basil and Bocarnea (2006) and Matviuk (2006).

Social Media Engagement

Participants reported their average daily social media usage by selecting one of four categories:

- i. Less than 1 hour
- ii. 1-3 hours
- iii. 3-5 hours
- iv. More than 5 hours

A brief demographic questionnaire also collected information on age, gender, academic background and social media platforms used as well as the celebrity or influencer they engage with most frequently and the modes of interaction (e.g., liking, commenting, etc.) they used in relation to that figure.

Procedure

Participants accessed the online survey via a secure Google Forms link distributed through university chat groups and social media platforms. After reading the study information and providing informed consent, participants completed the demographic section and the digital engagement questions, followed by the parasocial relationship scales (CPPI and CPI). The entire survey took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. Responses were automatically recorded and stored securely. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained properly.

Design

This study employed a **correlational design** to examine the relationship between the strength of parasocial relationships and digital engagement. The **independent variable** was the strength of parasocial relations measured through composite scores from the CPPI and CPI. The **dependent variable** was social media usage, measured categorically. Additional descriptive variables include the celebrity interacted with most and the modes of digital interaction.

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Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using **Jamovi (Version 2.6.44)**, a free and open-source statistical software based on R. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables. To examine the relationship strength and social media usage, a **Spearman's rank-order correlation** was conducted due to the ordinal nature of the usage variable. Additionally, **independent samples t-tests** were used to explore gender differences in parasocial relationship scores. **One-way ANOVAs** were conducted to test whether levels of parasocial interaction and identification differed across social media usage categories. Significance was set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS

To investigate the relationship between parasocial relationships and social media usage, as well as gender differences, statistical analyses were conducted using **Jamovi**. Analyses included **descriptive statistics, Spearman's correlation, independent samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA**. Parasocial relationship strength was measured using the **Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale (CPPI)** and the **Celebrity-Persona Identification Scale (CPI)**.

Descriptive Statistics

The sample consisted of 120 participants (60 men, 60 women). The mean CPPI score was **61.3 (SD = 13.0)** and the mean CPI score was **57.3 (SD = 15.1)**. Social media usage was categorized into four groups: less than 1 hour, 1–3 hours, 3–5 hours, and more than 5 hours per day. **Table 1** shows the mean and standard deviations for parasocial scores by gender and social media usage.

Scale Reliability

Internal consistency of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The CPPI scale demonstrated strong reliability ($\alpha = .89$), and the CPI scale also showed high reliability ($\alpha = .91$).

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations for Parasocial Scores by Gender and Social Media Usage

Gender	SM Usage (hrs/day)	N	CPPI M (SD)	CPI M (SD)
Male	<1	15	60.5 (0.71)	64.0 (5.66)
Male	1-3	15	60.4 (9.68)	57.0 (12.7)
Male	3-5	15	63.8 (8.56)	63.7 (14.2)
Male	>5	28	63.8 (18.7)	62.0 (18.2)
Female	<1	7	60.6 (8.83)	53.6 (9.81)
Female	1-3	10	62.2 (10.4)	55.9 (17.0)
Female	3-5	18	55.9 (10.1)	49.4 (12.8)
Female	>5	25	61.7 (12.3)	55.0 (15.6)

Note. CPPI= Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction, CPI= Celebrity Persona Identification, SM= Social Media

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Correlation Between Social Media Usage and Parasocial Relationship Strength (H1)

A **Spearman's correlation** was conducted to examine the association between social media usage and parasocial relationship scores. Results as showcased in **Table 2** indicated **no significant correlation** between social media usage and CPPI scores, $\rho(118) = .096$, $p = .295$, or between social media usage and CPI scores, $\rho(118) = .067$, $p = .464$. Thus, **H1 was not supported**. However, there was a **strong, positive correlation** between CPPI and CPI, $r_s(118) = .747$, $p < .001$, indicating that higher parasocial interaction was associated with greater identification.

Table 2 Spearman's Correlation Matrix for Study Variables

Variable	CPPI Total	CPI Total	SM Usage
CPPI Total	—	.747***	.096
CPI Total		—	.067
SM Usage		0.067	—

Note. N= 120. CPPI= Parasocial Interaction; CPI= Parasocial Identification; SM= Social Media.

*** $p < .001$.

Gender Differences in Parasocial Relationships (H2)

A **one-tailed independent samples t-test** was used to assess gender differences in CPPI and CPI scores. For **CPPI**, the difference between men ($M = 62.8$, $SD = 14.2$) and women ($M = 59.9$, $SD = 11.1$) was **not statistically significant**, $t(118) = 1.25$, $p = .215$. For **CPI**, men ($M = 61.3$, $SD = 15.6$) scored significantly higher than women ($M = 53.3$, $SD = 14.4$), $t(118) = 2.90$, $p = .004$ (see **Table 3**). Contrary to **H2**, results showed that **men reported stronger parasocial identification than women**.

Assumption testing was conducted prior to the one-tailed independent samples t-test. The Shapiro–Wilk test revealed that CPPI Total scores were not normally distributed ($W = 0.977$, $p = .040$), while CPI Total scores were normally distributed ($W = 0.993$, $p = .824$, see **Table 3.1**). Despite the violation of normality for one variable, the t-test remains robust to moderate violations, especially with samples over 30.

Levene's test confirmed no significant variance differences between groups for both CPPI and CPI scores ($ps > .05$), meeting the assumption of homogeneity of variances (see **Table 3.2**). Thus, the t-test was deemed appropriate for further analysis.

Table 3 One-Tailed Independent Samples t-Test Results

Variable	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	M (Male)	SD (Male)	M (Female)	SD (Female)
CPPI	1.25	118	.215	62.8	14.2	59.9	11.1
CPI	2.90	118	.004	61.3	15.6	53.3	14.4

Note. Results were non-significant in the hypothesized direction.

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Table 3.1 Shapiro-Wilk Test of Normality for CPPI and CPI Total Scores

	W	p
CPPI Total	0.977	0.040
CPI Total	0.993	0.824

Note. A low p-value suggests a violation of the assumption of normality

Table 3.2 Levene's Test for Homogeneity of Variances for CPPI and CPI Total Scores

	F	df	df2	p
CPPI Total	1.561	1	118	0.214
CPI Total	0.876	1	118	0.351

Note. A low p-value suggests a violation of the assumption of equal variances

Differences in Parasocial Relationship Strength Across Social Media Usage Groups (H3)

A **Welch's ANOVA** was conducted to determine whether parasocial scores differed based on social media usage levels. For **CPPI**, the analysis revealed **no significant difference** across usage groups, $F(3, 37.1) = 0.458, p = .713$. For **CPI**, there was also **no significant difference**, $F(3, 36.8) = 0.269, p = .847$ (see **Table 4**).

Before the ANOVA and post-hoc analyses, we assessed normality and homogeneity of variances. The Shapiro–Wilk test showed CPPI Total scores were not normally distributed ($W = 0.977, p = .034$), whereas CPI Total scores were normal ($W = 0.994, p = .865$) (see **Table 4.1**). Levene's test indicated a violation of homogeneity of variance for CPPI scores ($F(3, 116) = 3.25, p = .024$), but not for CPI scores ($F(3, 116) = 1.28, p = .286$) (see **Table 4.3**). Thus, interpretation of post-hoc results for CPPI should be done with caution.

Post-hoc Tukey tests were conducted to explore pairwise group differences in CPPI and CPI scores and it was confirmed that no individual group comparisons were statistically significant (*all p-values* > .05). Therefore, **H3 was not supported**.

Table 4 Welch's ANOVA Results for Parasocial Scores by Social Media Usage

Variable	F	df1	df2	p
CPPI	0.458	3	37.1	0.713
CPI	0.269	3	36.8	0.847

Note. No significant differences were found between groups.

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Table 4.1 Shapiro-Wilk Test of Normality for Total CPPI and CPI Scores (Multiple Group Comparison)

	W	p
CPPI Total	0.977	0.034
CPI Total	0.994	0.865

Note. A low p-value suggests a violation of the assumption of normality

Table 4.2 Levene's Test of Homogeneity of Variances for Total CPPI and CPI Scores

	F	df1	df2	p
CPPI Total	3.25	3	116	0.024
CPI Total	1.28	3	116	0.286

DISCUSSION

This study examined the association between parasocial relationship (PSR) strength and social media engagement, with particular emphasis on platform usage, types of celebrity interactions, and gender differences. The findings are discussed in relation to the previously stated research objectives and hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Positive Correlation between Social Media Usage and PSR Strength

Contrary to initial expectations, the results did not support Hypothesis 1. **No statistically significant correlation** was observed between self-reported social media usage and total scores on the **Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction (CPPI)** and the **Celebrity-Persona Identification (CPI)** scales. This indicates that the amount of time spent on social media alone does not reliably predict the strength of parasocial bonds with celebrities. However, a strong, positive correlation was identified between CPPI and CPI scores, suggesting that higher levels of parasocial interaction are associated with greater identification.

These findings imply that mere time spent on social media is not an adequate predictor of parasocial bond strength. This aligns with existing research emphasizing the importance of qualitative engagement—such as the nature of content consumed and emotional investment—over simply measuring usage duration (Stever & Lawson, 2013; Lee & Watkins, 2016). Additionally, passive behaviors like scrolling without active participation, such as commenting or sharing, may contribute to the weak association observed.

The results also differ from prior studies such as Greenwood and Long (2011), who reported a positive relationship between media usage time and parasocial involvement, and Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011), who found that increased media exposure can enhance perceived intimacy with media figures. A potential explanation is that while users may spend significant time online, this time is often divided among diverse content types and multiple platforms, which could reduce opportunities for establishing strong parasocial relationships. Descriptive data indicates that **44.2%** of respondents reported using social media for more than five hours per week, followed by **27.5%** who used it for three to five hours. These

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figures reflect high levels of digital engagement, although such engagement does not necessarily translate into the development of strong parasocial bonds.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Gender Differences in PSR Strength

While the hypothesis predicted that women would report stronger parasocial relationships, **men scored significantly higher on the CPI scale**, indicating greater identification with celebrities. However, **no statistically significant gender differences** were observed for the CPPI scale. This finding contrasts with previous research, which often associates greater parasocial closeness with female respondents (McCutcheon et al., 2002; Giles, 2002), particularly in contexts involving emotional or nurturing connections.

One possible interpretation is that male participants may be more inclined to identify with aspirational figures such as athletes, public commentators, or influencers who promote traits like autonomy, success, or dominance—concepts aligned with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Since the CPI assesses identification and admiration rather than emotional intimacy, the observed gender differences may reflect different forms of parasocial engagement rather than differences in overall intensity. Specifically, men may engage in achievement-oriented parasocial identification, whereas women may develop emotionally supportive parasocial bonds that are better captured by other subscales or qualitative insights.

This suggests that parasocial relationships are not inherently gendered experiences, or that the platforms and celebrity types represented in this sample appeal equally across genders. Although some studies indicate that women tend to form stronger parasocial attachments (Theran et al., 2010), especially with emotionally expressive or relationally oriented celebrities, the current findings imply that the formation of parasocial relationships may be becoming more gender-neutral. This could be due to the increasing normalization of emotional expression and celebrity engagement among men online (Stever & Lawson, 2013). Additionally, the balanced gender distribution among participants who engage actively with online content might contribute to these results.

Nevertheless, the qualitative data regarding the types of celebrities followed reveal gender-specific tendencies. Female participants primarily reported engaging with musicians, actors, and lifestyle influencers—categories often associated with emotional expression and aesthetic appeal, which align with traditional feminine preferences (Dibble et al., 2016). This pattern supports findings that women tend to gravitate toward celebrities embodying relational warmth or soft power (Tian & Yoo, 2015).

Conversely, male participants predominantly followed athletes and competitive performers, consistent with research indicating that men are often attracted to figures representing achievement, competition, and performance—elements linked to traditional masculinity (Cohen, 2004; Brown et al., 2003). While these patterns were not subjected to statistical analysis in this study, they align with prior research suggesting that gendered socialization influences the nature of parasocial bonds (Maltby et al., 2005). These distinctions may be rooted in cultural scripts related to masculinity and femininity, as well as the different symbolic roles celebrities serve for followers.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Engagement Behaviours and PSR Strength

The third hypothesis suggested that individuals who participate in more interactive behaviors, such as commenting and sharing, would exhibit higher scores on parasocial relationship measures compared to those who primarily consume content passively. However, the data did not provide significant support for this hypothesis. A one-way Welch's ANOVA revealed **no significant differences** in parasocial relationship strength across various engagement categories, including commenting, liking, and sharing. Post-hoc analyses further confirmed the lack of meaningful group differences. These results imply that parasocial bonds are likely **influenced by factors beyond mere screen time**, such as personal motivations, media preferences, and individual personality traits.

These findings are somewhat inconsistent with prior research, which has indicated that interactive parasocial behaviors—like liking, commenting, and sharing—are associated with increased feelings of identification and intimacy with celebrities (Frederick et al., 2012; Kim & Song, 2016). It is possible that the frequency and intent behind these interactions are more critical determinants than the behaviors themselves. For instance, liking a post may often be habitual or superficial and may not necessarily reflect a deeper emotional connection.

Descriptive statistics showed that liking posts was the most prevalent behavior, reported by **92.5%** of participants. In contrast, fewer participants reported sharing posts (**37.5%**), commenting (**18.3%**), or sending direct messages (**4.2%**), indicating that most interactions remain one-sided and passive. These observations suggest that while interactive behaviors—particularly liking—are common, they do not necessarily indicate more profound parasocial engagement, especially if they lack emotional investment.

Regarding self-reported engagement intensity on a scale of 1 to 5, the largest proportion of participants selected a rating of **3 (28.3%)**, indicating moderate engagement. Notably, **16.7%** selected the maximum rating of **5**, reflecting a smaller but notable group with high levels of engagement. These patterns are consistent with the nature of parasocial interactions, which can develop and persist without reciprocal communication. Nonetheless, the low frequency of active behaviors may help explain why there was no stronger statistical correlation between engagement type and parasocial relationship scores.

Social Media Platforms and Celebrity Engagement

Based on the descriptive statistics, Instagram was identified as the most commonly used and preferred platform for celebrity engagement, with **96.7%** of respondents indicating its use. This was followed by YouTube at **66.7%** and Snapchat at **29.2%**. These findings support previous research suggesting that visual and video-based platforms are particularly effective for fostering parasocial relationships, as they offer immersive and personal-feeling content. Platforms such as Reddit, Pinterest, and LinkedIn were infrequently selected, indicating they may be less conducive to facilitating parasocial interactions.

Although specific celebrities were not examined in this analysis, the diversity of platforms and behaviors observed suggests that parasocial relationships are maintained through both the type of content consumed and the passive nature of interactions, which can still generate a sense of perceived intimacy.

While this study did not analyze platform or celebrity engagement by gender, existing literature indicates that women tend to be more engaged with visually rich, emotionally

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resonant content and parasocial figures in areas such as lifestyle, music, or fashion (Bocarnea, 2007; Bond, 2016). Conversely, men are more likely to engage with sports figures, comedians, or streamers—individuals associated with performance and humor (Cohen, 2004). This corresponds with the concept of gendered parasocial orientation, where women typically engage with "soft power" celebrities, and men with figures representing competitive or traditionally masculine domains. These patterns align with prior research by McCutcheon et al. (2004) and Tian and Hoffner (2010), highlighting how media preferences are reflective of broader gender norms and identity development processes.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of parasocial relationships (PSRs) and digital engagement, several limitations should be recognized. First, the reliance on **self-reported data** introduces potential biases, such as **social desirability bias** and **recall inaccuracies**, particularly regarding time spent on social media. Second, the measurement of social media usage was categorical and broad, lacking sufficient detail to differentiate between passive scrolling, active engagement, and platform-specific behaviors. Third, although gender differences were examined, the study did not quantitatively analyze variations based on specific types of celebrities or platforms, which could have yielded more nuanced psychological or cultural insights. Fourth, the sample size, while balanced across genders, was relatively modest (N = 120) and primarily composed of a younger, technologically proficient demographic, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings.

Lastly, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to infer causal relationships or assess the longitudinal development of parasocial relationships over time.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies should consider incorporating the following directions: (1) platform-specific analyses, (2) longitudinal designs, (3) qualitative approaches, (4) intersectional demographics, and (5) experimental methods. These approaches would help better capture the nuances and complexities of parasocial engagement in contemporary digital environments.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Theoretical Implications

This study adds to the expanding body of research supporting the Uses and Gratifications Theory, particularly within digital media contexts. Although the amount of time spent on social media did not directly correlate with the strength of parasocial relationships, findings indicate that users engage with social media primarily for entertainment, companionship, and a sense of identification. This reinforces the notion that the gratification sought through media use is not necessarily related to usage intensity. Additionally, the absence of significant gender differences in parasocial relationship strength challenges traditional assumptions that emotional engagement is gender-specific, suggesting a potential shift toward a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of media attachment within parasocial theory.

Practical Implications

For digital marketers, influencers, and content creators, these findings highlight the importance of authenticity and relatability over simply increasing exposure frequency. Brands and creators seeking to foster loyalty should focus on producing content that

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encourages identification and emotional engagement, rather than solely increasing output volume. Additionally, mental health professionals and educators may find it useful to understand how PSRs can help address social and emotional needs, particularly for individuals experiencing loneliness or isolation—while remaining mindful of the limitations and potential psychological risks associated with disproportionately one-sided attachments.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the relationship between parasocial relationships and digital engagement across various social media platforms. Although the primary hypotheses predicting strong correlations between time spent, engagement type, and the strength of parasocial relationships were not statistically supported, the findings provide valuable descriptive and theoretical insights that underscore the complex nature of parasocial bonds in the digital age.

The data indicate that factors such as interaction style, platform preferences, and content type may play a more significant role than simply the amount of screen time in influencing parasocial connections. Additionally, the study challenges traditional gender-based assumptions regarding parasocial relationships, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of how individuals form connections with media figures in online environments.

As digital culture continues to evolve, gaining a deeper understanding of the psychological aspects underlying celebrity-fan relationships remains essential—not only for advancing academic theory but also for informing content development, promoting user well-being, and supporting ethical communication practices.

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Conflict of Interest

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