

**Learning to See Through the Screen:
Why Schools Need to Teach About Parasocial Relationships**

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Everyone has a favorite content creator. Maybe it is a gamer who streams every night, a lifestyle vlogger who shares their daily routine, or a TikTok personality whose videos pop up on the For You page constantly. These creators feel like friends, like people who really get us. But here is the thing: they do not know we exist. This one-sided emotional connection is called a parasocial relationship, and while experts say these connections are natural and sometimes beneficial, they also agree that social media has made them more intense and potentially problematic than ever before. The question is not whether parasocial relationships exist—they clearly do, and they are everywhere. The real question is what we do about it. Schools need to incorporate media literacy education specifically focused on parasocial relationships because young people deserve the tools to recognize when their connections to creators are healthy and when they are being manipulated.

First, the scale of parasocial relationships in today's media landscape demands educational attention. According to Wang et al. (2025) at the Pew Research Center, Americans spend significant amounts of time consuming content from creators they follow on platforms like TikTok, often multiple hours per day. This is not just passive entertainment—it is repeated, daily exposure to personalities who are specifically designed to feel relatable and trustworthy with many of the adults who were interviewed for their survey (10,287 adult internet users in the United States from March 18 to 24, 2024) and they found that many of those adults “regularly get news on TikTok, [and] just as many. . . get news on the site from influencers or celebrities (68%) as from news outlets or journalists (67%)” (para. 8). As the Cleveland Clinic (2023) explains, parasocial relationships form when someone invests feelings and attention into a person

who does not even know they exist, and they quote on authority as saying “‘The relationship really stems from repeated exposure to a public figure or a celebrity,’ Dr. Borland explains. ‘That exposure creates a sense of intimacy and a perceived connection’” (“How do Parasocial Relationships Form,” para. 3). The brain starts treating these creators like real friends because it is receiving regular "updates" about their lives. Combine that with the sheer volume of content young people consume, and you have a generation forming more parasocial relationships than any generation in history. Schools already teach students how to evaluate sources for research papers and how to recognize bias in news. Teaching them to understand their own emotional connections to media figures is just the next logical step.

More importantly, there is growing evidence that parasocial relationships are being deliberately exploited for profit. Widjaya (2025) reports that content creators intentionally build parasocial connections with their followers because stronger emotional bonds keep people watching longer and make them more likely to buy merchandise, donate money, or subscribe to premium content, and they point out that “‘Similarly, posts that promote goods and services are much more common among the most-followed accounts’” (“Popular Creators Share,” para. 2). The video "Neuromarketing: How Brands Are Getting Your Brain to Buy More Stuff" (DW Planet A, 2021) explains how companies use psychological techniques to create emotional bonds with consumers, and content creators use these exact same strategies. They share personal stories to create intimacy, they address viewers directly to simulate conversation, and they maintain consistent posting schedules to become part of their audience's daily routine. None of this is inherently evil, but it does mean that the "friendship" viewers feel is often the result of calculated marketing strategies rather than genuine connection. Young people deserve to know this. Just like we teach kids to recognize when advertisements are trying to manipulate them, we should

teach them to recognize when creators are using psychological techniques to strengthen parasocial bonds.

To be clear, teaching media literacy about parasocial relationships does not mean telling students that all parasocial connections are bad. Yuhas (2024) argues that these relationships can actually provide comfort, reduce loneliness, and help people practice social skills: a research group [Lotun, Matran-Fernandez & Sandstrom, 2024] published findings that suggest some people feel their parasocial relationships more effectively fulfill emotional needs than in-person acquaintances” (“In April,” para. 1). The Cleveland Clinic (2023) backs this up by noting that for people who struggle with social anxiety or have limited access to in-person friendships, parasocial relationships can be a helpful supplement to their social life. Sociologist Elaine Liu (TED, 2013) points out that humans are naturally wired to care about other people's lives, which is part of why we form these attachments so easily, and she notes that she “studies the celebrity ecosystem to understand social culture, to understand social behavior, to understand humanity, to understand ourselves” (00:03:22). The goal of education should not be to eliminate parasocial relationships—that would be both impossible and unnecessary. Instead, the goal should be helping students understand the difference between a parasocial relationship that adds to their life and one that replaces real human connection. The Cleveland Clinic (2023) specifically notes that parasocial relationships become unhealthy when someone starts preferring the safety of a one-sided connection over the messiness of real friendships. That distinction is exactly what media literacy education can help students recognize.

Some people argue that schools are already overwhelmed with curriculum requirements and that adding another topic would be impractical. They might also argue that parasocial relationships are a personal matter that parents should handle, not something for classroom

instruction. These concerns are understandable, but they miss the bigger picture. Media literacy is already part of many school curricula—we are just talking about expanding what that means to include the emotional dimension of media consumption. As for leaving it to parents, many parents did not grow up with social media and do not fully understand how parasocial relationships work on modern platforms. Even parents who do understand may not know how to talk to their kids about it. Schools are in a unique position to provide systematic, age-appropriate education about these issues in ways that reach all students, not just those whose parents happen to be media-savvy. The time students spend consuming creator content is not decreasing—if anything, it is increasing. Waiting for parents to figure this out on their own means letting another generation navigate these relationships without guidance.

Parasocial relationships are not going away. Social media and content creation have made them a permanent part of how young people experience connection, entertainment, and community. The research is clear: these relationships can be healthy when they supplement real social connections, but they can become harmful when they replace them or when they are deliberately exploited for profit. Schools have a responsibility to prepare students for the world they actually live in, and that world includes thousands of content creators competing for emotional attachment. Teaching media literacy about parasocial relationships is not about making students cynical or telling them their feelings are not real. It is about giving them the knowledge to make informed choices about where they invest their emotional energy. Students who understand how parasocial relationships work can still enjoy their favorite creators—they will just be able to do it with their eyes open.

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AI Disclosure: I used Claude to help me brainstorm how to turn my informative essay into an argument and to check my APA formatting. I also asked it to help me think of counterarguments to my position so I could address them. I did not use it to write any sections of my essay. The ideas and words in this paper are mine, and I can explain and defend every argument I make.