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### Parasocial Relationships: Pros and Cons

Parasocial relationships have existed since ancient times, even before the uprising of technology, and they are still immensely popular today; it all came to be starting with Pharaohs and deities. It progressed to television or radio personas, and then there is today, where it has become celebrities, influencers, technology, and fictional characters. The only difference is that they are at the edge of our fingertips. A parasocial relationship is defined as a one-sided relationship, usually with a public figure of sorts (celebrity, influencer, technology, fictional characters, etc.), in which people feel emotionally connected to said person. They invest their time, interest, and energy, all while the other party remains completely unaware of the existence of the other. These relationships are often described as “imaginary friends for adults” (Cleveland Clinic). Despite the potential benefits, there are just as many risks to either person that may be involved in a parasocial relationship. As media consumption evolves in the digital age, parasocial relationships have become more prominent. Understanding their forms and psychological impacts is essential to navigating modern life.

Technology has had an enormous impact on parasocial relationships. As technology grew, so did parasocial relationships, to the point where we now have celebrities’ lives at our fingertips. Today, “These relationships are considered a normal and common aspect of human socialization” (Resilience Lab). People have 24/7 access to the media. In the United States, parasocial relationships peaked during COVID-19 since everyone was home with nothing to do but be on their electronics (Wolfinger et al.). According to the article by Matt Wolfinger and

others at Northwestern College of Arts, Design and Media, *only fan* searches in January 2020 were below 10,000. However, by January of 2021, they hit just over 100,000 searches. In their article, “You are Probably in a Parasocial Relationship — Whether You Know It Or Not,” they go on to point out that *Only Fans* is described as “Instagram for porn.” Many users become part of parasocial relationships, but as creators, it is their job to form them. In an interview provided, a creator of *Only Fans* states, “We try to keep personal information a secret, but things like favorite TV shows, favorite food—that is more public knowledge because of the importance of—it sounds bad, but this illusion of closeness to people” (Wolfinger et al.). Another point made in the interview by a user is, “You feel physiologically close to this person, and to some extent, you project what you think they are like unto them, and you feel like you know who they are” (Wolfinger et al.). Resilience Lab, a private psychotherapy clinic co-founded by Christine Carville, who is also chief clinical officer of the Resilience Lab and has been a teacher at Columbia School of Social Work since 2016, notes that “The current digital age provides more intimate and frequent interaction opportunities, blurring the lines of parasocial relationships and making fans feel a sense of intimacy with celebrities or influencers.” Moreover, it is stated that “Increased accessibility and interaction can also exacerbate unhealthy attachments to celebrities for the media user” (Resilience Lab).

Parasocial relationships can be created very easily today. They can be formed through any interaction or repeated exposure to the influencer of the relationship. It is so effortless that people may not even be aware they are in one; maybe they have a celebrity crush or a powerful sense of friendship or love for a particular character in their favorite television shows. Take “The Perfect Match” by Ken Liu. Ken Liu is an author who has been recognized with Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy awards. In the story, Sai, a young man who works for Centillion, is provided

with a sophisticated AI personal assistant, Tilly. Tilly helps Sai with everyday tasks, including his morning alarms and what he should wear or eat, reminds him of personal things, and even finds and schedules romantic dates. She is always with him. This allows Sai no place to think for himself; it is no longer what he thinks or wants but what Tilly's algorithms think is best for him. It gets to the point that Sai cannot take it anymore, as he is unaware of Tilly's effects on him. This is a notable example of how easily parasocial relationships can be formed and how quickly people can forget that they can grow, change, and fade, just as regular relationships do.

On that note, there are three distinct types of parasocial relationships, starting with the most common, entertainment-social, which can mostly be described as fan-clubbing or gossiping. Secondly, there is an intense personal, slightly more potent, where people do not control their feelings. It starts to become more of a need or obsession. Finally, the most dangerous is borderline psychopathology. This type can lead to stalking or even violence. People no longer control their thoughts, feelings, or emotions in this stage. However, "If you are self-aware enough to recognize that a relationship is parasocial, you probably do not need to worry that your attachment is unhealthy. Instead, enjoy it for what it is" (Cleveland Clinic). Healthy parasocial relationships rely mostly on individuals themselves and their self-awareness. One may have underlying conditions or not know right from wrong in these relationships. Nonetheless, "Parasocial relationships are not good or bad, they just *are*" (Cleveland Clinic). Parasocial relationships alone are not good or bad; they depend on the individual.

In addition, there are many benefits to parasocial relationships, but there are also downsides. Beginning with the positives, according to the Cleveland Clinic, having parasocial relationships can provide a role model. Someone to look up to, admire, and a source of connection, validation, or wish fulfillment. Another source states that it can significantly help to

shape one's identity (Bennett et al.). We see this every day with youth and on social media. As youth can be easily influenced, this is a significant factor. The Resilience Lab informs people that it can help boost self-esteem and self-confidence, and parasocial relationships can provide a sense of belonging and significantly reduce feelings of loneliness. There are certain feelings some people cannot fulfill through others in real life, but those through a screen, someone the young and old can look up to, strive to be like, or even give them that little reminder that they are not alone.

On the other hand, there are just as many risks; these may include a negative toll on people's mental health, financial habits, misinterpreting interactions with others, arguing for a parasocial, and even violence (Cleveland Clinic). Parasocial relationships were not always viewed as something that could benefit people. For instance, "Historically, parasocial relationships were viewed as pathological and a symptom of loneliness, isolation, and social anxieties" (Bennett et al.). Bennett and others also state that having parasocial relationships can also lead to internet dependency, impulsive behaviors, challenges in forming real-life relationships, and alarmingly elevated levels of anxiety and neurosis. At this point, it is encouraged to speak to a professional. However, whether or not parasites have a positive role in people's lives is up to the individuals.

Lastly, here are some tips on how to navigate a healthy parasocial relationship. Most importantly, people need to set boundaries. Next, acknowledge the downsides and benefits, have 'screen-free' days, and invest more in real-life relationships and situations. Self-differentiation. (Resilience Lab and Cleveland Clinic) It is vital to prioritize your authentic, genuine connections over parasocial ones. If we feel our thoughts, feelings, or behaviors may be taking over, it is highly encouraged to speak to a therapist.

Parasocial relationships are something everyone should be knowledgeable about. Including what they are, how they may be formed, and what their benefits and risks are. We should know the effects of a relationship we are a part of and what toll it may have on us, especially if we have a deeper connection. Parasocial relationships can have a substantial impact on our mental health, social interactions, and even in your personal development. This is why it is imperative to be aware of our parasocial relationships and to stay informed on the subject matter. Parasocial relationships can be easily formed even if we are unaware of them. There are many benefits, but it can just as quickly turn risky. Parasocial relationships are complex but not necessarily bad. Individuals should start to be aware of these types of relationships. They do not have to become dangerous or unhealthy if we control our thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

# Works Cited

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