

Parasocial Relationships: A Natural Outcome of Today's Technology

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Have people ever felt emotionally connected to a celebrity, influencer, or even a fictional character -- someone who does not know they exist? This is the essence of parasocial relationships, a one-sided emotional bond in which people invest their time, energy, and interest into a public figure who remains completely unaware of their existence. These relationships are not new; they date back to ancient times, beginning with worshipping pharaohs and deities. Over time, they have evolved into attachments to radio hosts and TV personalities, and today, they include celebrities, influencers, digital assistants, and fictional characters, all accessible with just a few taps. According to estimates, around 51% of Americans have experienced a parasocial relationship, though only about 16 % will admit to it (Haupt A. & Johnson, 2024). Often described as "Imaginary friends for adults" (Cleveland Clinic, 2024), these connections can range from harmless fandom to obsessive behavior. As the digital media continues to shape how individuals connect with others, parasocial relationships have become more widespread and emotionally impactful. However, their effects on individuals and society are complex and always advancing—neither entirely positive nor entirely harmful—raising important questions about emotional health, the media's influence, and the nature of the modern connection.

Technology is rapidly advancing and has played a key role in how parasocial relationships are formed. As the media continues to evolve, so do parasocial relationships, bringing celebrities' lives to anyone's fingertips. Today, "These relationships are considered a normal and common aspect of human socialization" (Resilience Lab, n.d.). With around-the-clock access to the media, some users may not understand that as creators or influencers, it is their job to form these connections, a strategy. In an interview provided in an article, a creator of *Only Fans* explains, "We try to keep personal information a secret, but things like favorite TV shows, favorite foods—that is more public knowledge because of the importance of—it sounds

bad, but this illusion of closeness to people" (Wolfinger et al., 2016). A user in the same article added, "You feel physiologically close to this person, and to some extent, you project what you think they are like onto them, and you feel like you know who they are" (Wolfinger et al., 2016). This perspective shows that the feeling of connection stems from purposefully executed content, even though they are just doing their job.

Furthermore, Resilience Lab (n.d.) notes, "The current digital age provides more intimate and frequent interaction opportunities, blurring the lines of parasocial relationships and asking fans to feel a sense of intimacy with celebrities or influencers." This provides information on the effect of technology on parasocial relationships. While the openness of the media allows a connection to be formed, it can also lead to unintended consequences. As they point out, "Increase accessibility and interaction can also exacerbate unhealthy attachments to celebrities for the media user" (Resilience Lab, n.d.). Parasocial relationships can be made so simply that some individuals may not even realize they are experiencing the connection.

Parasocial relationships can be categorized into three distinct types. The first is entertainment-social, which is often characterized by light engagement, such as joining fan clubs or discussing celebrities with others. The second is intense-personal, where individuals may experience stronger emotional attachments and struggle to control their feelings toward a public figure. The third and most concerning type is referred to as borderline pathological. At this level, behavior may begin to resemble obsession and could, in extreme cases, lead to stalking or even violence. Individuals experiencing this level of attachment may find it difficult to manage their thoughts, emotions, and actions. (Cleveland Clinic, 2024)

However, whether or not a healthy parasocial relationship relies on the individuals and their self-awareness, one may have an underlying condition or not know right from wrong in

these relationships. The inability to set boundaries can also play a role in any relationship. Nonetheless, "Parasocial relationships are not good or bad; they just *are*" (Cleveland Clinic, 2024). This shows that parasocial relationships are neutral; they vary based on the individual. The effects can vary depending on the person involved.

In addition to potential risks, parasocial relationships offer many benefits. According to the Cleveland Clinic (2024), having parasocial relationships can provide role models. Someone to look up to, admire, and a source of connection, validation, or wish fulfillment. Another source states that these relationships can significantly help to shape one's identity (Bennet et al., 2020), especially among the youth, who are more susceptible to the media. Moreover, the Resilience Lab (n.d) informs people that it can help those with low self-esteem or confidence. These relationships also provide a sense of belonging and significantly reduce feelings of loneliness. There are certain feelings some people cannot fulfill through others in genuine life relationships, but those through a screen, someone the old and young can look up to, to strive to be like, or even give them that little reminder that they are not alone. These relationships can serve as a meaningful source of comfort and connection for individuals of all ages.

An example of a healthy parasocial relationship could be following an influencer who inspires others to live a healthy lifestyle. However, it may also be following a singer, politician, or celebrity who came from a similar background and achieved success. And that motivates others to find success. (Lawler, 2024)

While parasocial relationships can offer many benefits, they also have notable risks. According to Cleveland Clinic (2024), these may include a negative toll on people's mental health, financial habits, misinterpreting interactions with others, arguing on a media figures' behalf, and, in extreme cases, even violence (Cleveland Clinic, 2024). 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., 2020). The negative aspect of parasocial relationships is that they may play a role in all of these. Recent research from Bennet and others (2020) continues to highlight the potential downsides of having parasocial relationships, including internet dependency, impulsive behaviors, challenges forming real-life relationships, and alarmingly elevated levels of anxiety and neurosis. Speaking to a professional would be highly encouraged in any situation where these effects interfere with people's daily lives. Still, it is important to recognize that the overall impact of parasocial relationships — positive or negative — the conclusion depends on the individuals and their self-control. Furthermore, whether these relationships have a positive or negative role in people's lives is up to them.

In Example, "The Perfect Match," by Ken Liu (2012) 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 eventually gets to the point that Sai cannot take it anymore, as he was not aware of the effects Tilly had on him. This is a notable example of how easily parasocial relationships can be formed and how quickly people can forget they can grow, change, fade, and end, just as regular relationships do. This also shows that setting boundaries is important. Had Sai set them from the start this could have been a very healthy and helpful parasocial relationship.

However, there are several considerations that may help individuals to manage a healthy parasocial relationship. Setting boundaries can be helpful, as well as acknowledging the downsides and the benefits. Some people find that having ‘screen-free’ days and choosing to invest more in real life relationships and situations. Practicing self-differentiation — keeping one’s own identity while engaging with media figures — can also play a role. (Resilience Lab, n.d.; Cleveland Clinic, 2024) It is vital to prioritize individuals' authentic, genuine connections over parasocial ones. For those who feel their thoughts, emotions, or behaviors are becoming too difficult to manage, consulting a professional may be helpful.

Some may argue that parasocial relationships are usually harmless or even beneficial. However, this perspective can overlook how the media shapes these connections. These bonds are carefully crafted through repeated exposure and influence designed to trigger emotional responses. Sometimes, even without the users realizing how deep their emotional investment may go, this creates a relationship where one's emotional energy is wasted and invested in a one-sided relationship without mutual acknowledgment or accountability. While some users choose to engage with media figures in a healthy, life-balanced way, many are vulnerable to emotional dependency, especially when dealing with loneliness, low self-esteem, or isolation. The 'illusion of closeness' can make it difficult for individuals to tell the difference between fantasy and reality. Overall, this affects how they approach real-life relationships and even their self-worth.

In the end, parasocial relationships are neither good nor bad; their impact largely depends on the individual and their choice of interaction; everyone is different. While these one-sided relationships can offer comfort, motivation, or even a sense of belonging, they can also lead to over-investment, emotionally and physically, misinterpreting interactions and difficulty maintaining genuine life relationships if boundaries are not established. As technology evolves

and continues to blur the lines of reality, it becomes increasingly important to approach these relationships with awareness, critical thinking, and balance. Whether one's purpose is for inspiration or potential emotional strain depends on our awareness, self-control, and purpose. Ultimately, parasocial relationships reflect today's evolving forms of connection, and how people navigate them is up to them.

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