From Screens to Souls:

Parasocial Relationships, Mental Health, and Therapeutic Practice

by

Min Kim

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APPROVED BY

Jill Taggart, Ph.D. RCC-ACS, Capstone Advisor, Master of Counsellor Faculty

Maria Stella, Ph.D. RCC, Faculty Second Reader, Director, MEd School Counselling

School of Health and Social Sciences

Dedication or Acknowledgement

To the characters, idols, and creators who accompanied me through every chapter of my life; your stories held me before I knew how to hold myself.

And to the younger version of myself, who found comfort in imaginary worlds and was never alone.

Abstract

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) have become increasingly common. Although they remain under-explored in therapeutic practice, they have meaningful psychological functions. This capstone explores the development, benefits, and risks of PSRs through three theoretical lenses: Attachment Theory, Object Relations Theory, and Social Development Theory. I review the current literature that indicates PSRs can provide companionship, emotional regulation, identity exploration, and a sense of belonging, particularly for individuals experiencing loneliness or relational challenges. At the same time, research shows that PSRs can contribute to negative impacts such as unhealthy media use, body image concerns, social comparison, emotional distress during "parasocial breakups," and blurred boundaries intensified by the newer interactive digital platforms. I will highlight the importance of recognizing parasocial bonds as a normal part of development. PSRs can offer important insights into clients' attachment needs, internalized relational patterns, coping strategies, and identity formation. Recommendations highlight psychoeducation, CBT-informed approaches, improving media literacy and ways to manage loneliness while supporting clients in developing balanced offline connections.

Keywords: celebrity worship, parasocial relationships, parasocial interaction, parasocial phenomenon, social surrogates

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Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

The concept of parasocial relationships (PSR) was first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), describing one-sided psychological connections between individuals and media figures. These relationships do not involve reciprocal interaction, but they still impact individuals emotionally and cognitively. PSRs can provide comfort and a sense of belonging but they also raise important questions about their impact on mental health. Understanding these influences may be needed for developing therapeutic approaches in the future that acknowledge the significance of PSRs in clients' lives (Hartmann, 2016). Due to social media, PSRs are more dynamic and complex because they mimic two-way relationships (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Understanding parasocial relationships (PSR) is important because they play a major role in how individuals emotionally and cognitively connect with media personalities. Whether these interactions are positive or negative, they are a real and ongoing phenomenon in today's world. Therefore, gaining a deeper understanding may offer valuable insights about the evolving nature of different connections.

In this chapter, I will introduce the research problem. I will first outline the background of PSRs, highlighting gaps in research and the contemporary relevance of PSRs. The purpose of this capstone, including the research question will follow. Finally, theoretical orientations, my positionality, and definitions of key terms will be mentioned as grounds for the following chapters.

Background the Issue/Problem

Although parasocial relationships have become an increasingly eminent phenomenon, the research on their psychological impact is inconsistent. Previous research has explored the existence and emotional nature of parasocial relationships, but a lot of the research has focused on correlation and prediction and not causality (Pimienta, 2023). Therefore, there is limited understanding of distinct types of PSR based on general characteristics. Additionally, it remains difficult to categorize these relationships clearly. There has been confusion in both research and practice due to the inconsistent terminology. The lack of clear definitions and inconsistent terminology has led to challenges in measuring PSRs and their effects (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). For example, Liebers and Schramm found the lack of differentiation between Parasocial Interactions (PSI) and PSR have caused ambiguity in the field. They explain that PSI is a one-sided interaction that happens during the exposure to the media whereas PSRs are more long-term connections that continues on after the exposure. They found that earlier measuring scales like the PSI Scale measures PSRs rather than PSIs.

The initial conceptualization of PSRs focused mostly on traditional celebrities who appeared on TV and had no direct interaction beyond viewers watching them on screen (Pimienta, 2023). Pimienta noted that PSRs are now observed across diverse media contexts including interactions with internet content creators, book characters, video game figures, and political leaders. Moreover, the evolution of social media has changed the dynamics of PSRs. Traditional media portrayed a distant and a one-way communication with celebrities. Current social media platforms enable a perceived two-way interaction as it allows media figures to interact and share parts of their life with their fans. Platforms like Instagram and Twitter allow followers to "like," comment, or directly message influencers and celebrities. This increases the

sense of intimacy and connection (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). This shift has led to stronger emotional investments in these relationships that sometimes can compete with real-world social bonds (Lotun et al., 2024).

Despite their commonness, PSRs are often overlooked in clinical practice. Studies have shown PSRs can both be positive and negative to one's mental well-being (Hartmann, 2016). The positive impacts include being a coping mechanism for loneliness and anxiety, providing emotional support, and fostering identity development (Pimienta, 2023; Hartmann, 2016). However, they may also contribute to unhealthy attachment patterns, social isolation, and unrealistic expectations in interpersonal relationships (Hartmann, 2016).

One critical gap in the literature is the lack of a nuanced understanding of how different types of PSRs impact mental health. It appears that fewer studies explore relationships with fictional characters, influencers, or political figures (Cohen & Holbert, 2021). Additionally, most research has used quantitative methods, failing to include qualitative insights. This creates a gap in capturing the personal experiences of individuals with PSRs and understanding the different contexts. Addressing these gaps is important for both theoretical growth and practical implementations in therapeutic settings.

Purpose of the Capstone

The purpose of this capstone is to explore the positive and negative psychological impacts of parasocial relationships and explore how therapists can incorporate an understanding of PSRs into clinical practice. This capstone aims to provide insights into how mental health professionals can support clients who engage in parasocial connections by analyzing existing research and identifying patterns in PSR formation and their impacts. Overall, the intended

audience for this capstone includes students, counsellors, and researchers interested in the parasocial phenomenon.

Research Question(s)

The research questions this paper will address are:

- What are the positive and negative influences of parasocial relationships to the mind?
- How can therapists utilize an understanding of PSRs to better support clients in counselling settings?

Significance of the Capstone

From a counselling perspective, PSRs are common, consequential, and clinically relevant, yet they are understudied and underutilized. Clarifying PSR constructs and impacts can help clinicians (a) differentiate adaptive from maladaptive PSRs, (b) assess when PSRs function as coping versus avoidance, and (c) use the clients' information to develop PSR-informed case conceptualization, psychoeducation, and intervention planning. Stakeholders include clients, clinicians, supervisors, training programs, and organizations involved in digital well-being. By translating media-psychology findings into practice, this project supports ethically attuned, culturally responsive care.

Contributions to the Field

This topic is important because it explores an often-overlooked aspect of human relationships in the digital age. PSRs are pervasive and influence emotional well-being, yet they are rarely acknowledged in therapeutic frameworks (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). Understanding these relationships can help clinicians recognize their role in clients' lives, differentiate between healthy and maladaptive PSRs, and incorporate this awareness into therapeutic strategies.

Additionally, this capstone has broader implications for social psychology, media studies, and mental health advocacy. As media consumption advances and expands, I believe it is important to be cognizant of how parasocial interactions shape identity, relationships, and emotional health. This capstone contributes to a growing body of knowledge that can improve therapeutic approaches for individuals navigating PSRs by bridging psychological theory with clinical practice.

Theoretical Orientation

This research draws on three key theoretical frameworks: Attachment Theory, Object Relations Theory, and Social Development Theory. These frameworks are discussed in this paper to explore how parasocial relationships (PSRs) are developed and how they impact individuals' emotional and psychological well-being. Additionally, this paper will explore how therapists can integrate an understanding of PSRs into clinical practice.

Attachment Theory

John Bowlby (1969) developed Attachment Theory to explain how relationships with a caregiver at a young age shape emotional bonds and interpersonal relationships throughout an individual's life. This theory is relevant to PSRs because individuals may develop parasocial attachments that serve as substitutes for real-life connections, especially for those with insecure attachment styles. Research suggests that PSRs can provide comfort and stability and fulfil emotional needs similarly to real-world relationships (Pimienta, 2023). However, excessive reliance on PSRs can also reinforce unhealthy attachment patterns and make it difficult for individuals to form reciprocal social bonds.

Object Relations Theory

Object Relations Theory is a mixed approach stemming from theories by Melanie Klein (1934), William Fairbairn (1954), and Donald Winnicott (1960). The foundation of this theory assumes that humans want to be in relationships. They suggest that early relationships and how one internalizes them influence an individual's development. These beliefs impact the individuals' mental representations of others and themselves. Within the context of PSRs, media figures can function as "transitional objects" (Winnicott, 1953) that provide emotional support and regulation. This theory suggests that individuals may project their needs, fears, and desires onto parasocial figures and ultimately use these relationships to process unresolved emotions or unmet attachment needs. As a result, therapists working with clients who have strong PSRs can explore these relationships as reflections of deeper psychological patterns.

Social Development Theory

Lev Vygotsky's (1978) Social Development Theory emphasizes the function of social interaction in an individual's cognitive and emotional growth. In the modern era, media personalities and social media influencers are often seen as "more knowledgeable others" which can influence consumers' values, behaviours, and understanding of themselves. PSRs can contribute to social learning by a media figure being a role model for individuals navigating self-identity and interpersonal relationships (Tsay-Vogel & Schwartz, 2014). This is particularly relevant in adolescence and young adulthood as individuals are more receptive to social influence (Knoll et al., 2017). Therapists can use this framework to understand how PSRs impact a client's self-concept, aspirations, and decision-making processes.

Positionality Statement

I am a liberal, single, pansexual, Korean, educated, employed, able-bodied female. My interest in this topic stems from my personal experiences with parasocial relationships.

Throughout my childhood and even into adulthood, I have formed numerous PSRs. Some have helped me through difficult times while others have influenced my consumer behaviour and identity development. For a long time, immersing myself in an imaginary world and engaging with fictional characters provided me with joy and healing.

Growing up in Korean culture, particularly within the K-pop industry, I have witnessed how PSRs are not only common but also actively encouraged. Idols and entertainment companies cultivate these relationships through fan interactions, personalized content, and exclusive engagements that foster a sense of intimacy. This unique cultural context has shaped my understanding of PSRs as both beneficial and potentially problematic. While PSRs can provide comfort and motivation, they can also create unrealistic expectations and emotional dependencies. Moreover, my personal and cultural background informs my research approach as they drive my interest in understanding both the positive and negative implications of PSRs in mental health and counselling.

By integrating my lived experiences with academic research, I aim to contribute a nuanced perspective on PSRs and their role in therapeutic settings. This research is not just an academic exploration but also a reflection on the evolving essence of human relationships in the digital age.

Definition of Terms

- **Attachment Theory:** A psychological model describing how individuals form emotional bo nds with caregivers and others, influencing relationships throughout life (Bowlby, 1969).
- **Celebrity Worship:** “when persons with assumed intact identities become virtually obsessed with one or more celebrities—similar to an erotomanic type of delusional disorder” (Maltby et al., 2003., p.25)

- **Object Relations Theory:** A psychoanalytic theory that examines how early attachments shape mental representations of others and influence future relationships (Winnicott, 1953).
- **Parasocial Interaction (PSI):** A momentary, one-sided interaction between an individual and a media figure (Dibble et al., 2015)
- **Parasocial Relationship (PSR):** A long-term, one-sided psychological bond with a media figure, distinct from PSI (Dibble et al., 2015)
- **Social Development Theory:** A theory emphasizing the role of social interaction in learning and identity development (Vygotsky, 1978).
- **Social Media:** digital platforms that enable users to create, share, and engage with content in others (Merriam-Webster, 2025)
- **Social Surrogates:** media or entertainment experiences that give a sense of belonging even though a real, in-person experience of belonging did not happen (Derrick et al., 2009).

Overview of the Paper

In this chapter, I provided an overview of PSRs, the purpose of this capstone, the significance, theoretical orientation, my positionality, and key definitions. In the next chapter will review the literature and existing research on parasocial relationships and their psychological impacts.

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Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are increasingly relevant in today's digital and media-focused society. In Chapter one, I provided the reason and significance of studying PSRs through a psychological and therapeutic lens. I introduced the topic in academic literature, highlighted its growing relevance in clinical conversations, and presented the central research questions driving this capstone.

In this chapter, I will review the literature of current research on PSRs, with particular attention to the psychological impacts (positive and negative), the roles of social media and AI. I will begin by outlining the theoretical frameworks that shape the analysis: Attachment Theory, Object Relations Theory, and Social Development Theory. Following this, I will explore the literature across four major themes: (1) conceptual foundations and typologies of PSRs, (2) psychological outcomes of PSRs (both beneficial and harmful), (3) the role of social media and PSRs, (4) the impacts of AI and (5) implications for clinicians. The chapter concludes with a combination of findings and the identification of gaps in the literature.

Conceptual Clarification of Parasocial Phenomena

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are a growing topic of interest in the age of media saturation, but they are not exactly new. The concept has been around since Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced the term parasocial interaction (PSI) to describe the way media consumers often respond to media performers as if they could have an interaction with them in real life. PSI is that moment of perceived intimacy which is intensified when media figures make it seem like they are directly engaging with the consumer (Dibble et al., 2015). It is comparable to an imagined dialogue that simulates a real social exchange.

However, PSIs are just the beginning. Over time, these momentary interactions can develop into longer-lasting bonds which are referred to as parasocial relationships (PSRs) (Dibble et al., 2015; Hartmann, 2016; Liebers & Schramm, 2019). Recent articles clarify that PSR is a more lasting emotional or cognitive connection between the audience and a media figure. Unlike PSI, PSRs can continue on even when the immediate perceived interaction with the media figure ends (Hartmann, 2016; Liebers & Schramm, 2019). People can carry these relationships internally for months, years, or even decades. This could show up as looking to a favourite character for guidance, finding comfort in a public figure's consistency, or feeling a deep sense of familiarity and care toward someone they have never met.

While PSIs and PSRs are often used interchangeably in popular discourse, it is important to keep in mind that they are two different concepts. Unfortunately, many researchers have historically blurred the line between them (Dibble et al., 2015; Liebers & Schramm, 2019). For example, widely used tools like the Parasocial Interaction Scale by Rubin et al. (1985) have been criticized for measuring the emotional closeness of PSRs more than the actual moment-to-moment interaction of PSI (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). This insight, also emphasized by Dibble et al. (2015), is important for a literature review because it means many older studies using this scale may have been measuring the wrong thing. Moreover, the latest measurement tools like the Experience of Parasocial Interaction Scale (EPSI) by (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011) have been developed to better capture the real-time, simulated interactive experience of PSI, allowing for a clearer differentiation in research.

Recognizing this distinction is crucial not just for academic clarity but also for clinical understanding. The momentary sense of connection during media consumption (PSI) and the

longer-term bond that may develop over time (PSR) can each serve different psychological functions and have different implications for one's mental well-being.

Theoretical Frameworks for PSR Development

To fully understand PSRs, it helps to look at them through psychological theories that explain how people form and maintain emotional bonds. I will draw on Attachment Theory, Object Relations Theory, and Social Development Theory. These frameworks will help bring depth to the ways people engage with parasocial figures.

Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory, developed by Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), proposes that our earliest relationships form the blueprint for how we connect with others throughout life. The theory suggests that these early attachment experiences influence how individuals relate to others in adulthood. Bowlby suggests that our earliest relationships form the blueprint for how we connect with others throughout life. According to Bowlby (1973), humans build these "internal working models" through repeated interactions that act as a guide on what to expect from others in a relationship. When caregivers are consistent and receptive the child tends to grow into adults who can express their emotions and balance closeness and independence, also known as secure attachment. When the response is inconsistent, rejecting, or unpredictable, the individual often forms an anxious, avoidant, or disorganized attachment. These early working models of ourselves influence how people respond in relationships (Bolwby, 1969). In that way, Bowlby's work helps in understanding the deeper "why" behind the kinds of bonds people form which can be used in both offline and in online spaces. As PSRs are processed the same way as real-life relationships, it could be a reason why some people turn to parasocial figures for stability or comfort if their early attachment relationships were insecure.

From an attachment lens, individuals with insecure attachments would have difficulty forming or maintaining bonds (Dagan et al., 2021) Moreover, this concept has been applied to PSRs and parasocial attachment (PSA) and had started to emerge in older studies (Cole & Leets, 1999; Stever, 2013). Media figures and fictional characters offer a stable, consistently accessible presence that can provide temporary comfort for attachment anxieties or provide a sense of dependable closeness (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Cohen, 2004). Therefore, PSRs can be conceptualized as extensions or compensations for real-life attachment needs by providing a safe place for people to connect emotionally while they manage the challenges of real-life human social connections.

Studies have shown that people with anxious-ambivalent attachment styles are more likely to form stronger PSRs (Cole & Leets, 1999). As individuals with anxious attachment styles deeply want closeness and fear abandonment, PSRs can act as a "safe alternative" relationship where they can feel that intimacy without the risk of rejection (de Bérail & Bungener, 2022). On the other hand, individuals with avoidant attachment styles appear to keep their emotional distance and place a high value on independence (Cole & Leets, 1999; de Bérail & Bungener, 2022). As a result, they are less likely to form real life bonds as well as PSRs. Interestingly, individuals with a secure attachment style were found to experience comfort in parasocial bonds (Cole & Leets, 1999; Paravati et al., 2022). Interestingly, the researchers found that people in the secure category who showed some, but limited avoidant tendencies would use PSRs when seeking a sense of stability or emotional safety (de Bérail & Bungener, 2022; Paravati et al., 2022).

In this context, PSRs can be viewed of as a kind of secondary attachment (Stever, 2017). The viewer is not attached to the real media figure but rather to an internalized version of them.

This internalized version could be a mental image or an emotional imprint that offers the same kind of security, proximity, or reassurance humans seek in real-life relationships. People might not realize they are doing it, but they are turning to these figures for comfort in much the same way a child clings to a caregiver.

Object Relations Theory

Object Relations Theory centers on the idea of how early relational experiences are processed and underscores how these "objects" (internalized characterization of caregivers and others) form one's identity and impact their future relationships (Greenberg & Mitchell,1983). Klein (1946) emphasized how babies at first relate parts of objects and these early experiences frame how we manage anxiety, tolerate uncertainty, and process the good and bad parts of others. Fairbairn (1952) took this further by arguing that humans are fundamentally seeking relationships over pleasure and so when caregivers are not consistent or unresponsive, children internalize both the positive and negative sides of those caretakers. These mental images become templates for how people respond or expect from connections later on in life. It is similar to attachment theory, but attachment theory looks at the attachment experience where object relations theory focuses on the internal image of the caregiver.

Although many PSR studies do not name this theory directly, it is very much present in the way researchers describe the internalization of media figures. For example, as mentioned above, Stever's (2017) argument that PSRs function as secondary attachments aligns with Object Relations Theory as the individuals are forming ties not with the actual person but with their internal representation of that person. In this context, PSRs can function as psychological "objects" that may mirror or help repair early relational wounds.

Additionally, repeated exposure to a media figure allows their traits, mannerisms, and emotional tone to become internalized over time. These internalized figures can fill relational gaps, provide stability, or soothe unresolved emotional pain. For example, someone grieving or feeling isolated might turn to a familiar TV character for comfort. They may do this not because they expect a response, but because the imagined presence of that character provides reassurance, stability, or comfort. These representations can feel deeply meaningful because they fulfill emotional needs in ways that closely parallel real-life relationships (Cole & Leets, 1999; Derrick et al., 2009).

Social Development Theory

Vygotsky's (1978) Social Development Theory highlights the role of social interaction in cognitive and emotional growth. Vygotsky states that humans learn and grow through interactions and relationships with people who are slightly more capable or emotionally developed than them. He mentions "more knowledgeable others" (MKOs) who are these figures that provide guidance and help people make sense of the world by modelling behaviours and ultimately impact how we understand experiences. Although this theory was developed before digital media, the core idea relates to PSRs as MKOs do not have to be physically present.

From this perspective, PSRs can be viewed as part of the social platform that helps individuals, especially adolescents and young adults, learn social norms, empathy, and identity construction. Studies have shown parasocial connections are a normal part of psychological growth (Stever, 2017; de Bérail & Bungener, 2022; Stever, 2013; Giles, 2002). Therefore, forming PSRs can be a part of healthy identity development, especially during adolescence and young adulthood. For many youth, celebrities or fictional characters serve as aspirational figures. Studies have also shown that different media figures and different platforms can lead to different

styles of PSRs (Stever, 2017; de Bérail & Bungener, 2022). It appears that media figures model ways of being in the world and provide a low-risk environment for trying on different roles and values.

PSRs can be a part of how people explore their identity, values, and social norms, even in adulthood. The literature suggests that people use the same cognitive processes for imagined and face-to-face interactions (Giles, 2002). Therefore, it makes sense that these relationships feel real because cognitively, they are processed no differently. In short, PSRs are not merely products of modern media but are embedded in the ways humans socially and emotionally develop in a digitally mediated world.

Positive and Negative Impacts of Parasocial Relationships

PSRs can be incredibly meaningful and even therapeutic but they can also lead to distress if they become overly intense or disconnected from reality. In this section, I explore both positive and negative impacts of PSRs.

Positive Psychological Impacts

PSRs can fulfill social and emotional needs, especially when real-world connections are lacking (de Bérail & Bungener, 2022; Derrick et al., 2009; Hartmann, 2016; Lotun et al., 2024). For instance, Hartmann (2016) looked at how parasocial experiences can influence an individual's well-being and found that PSRs also give a sense of companionship. This can help individuals who feel lonely, as the imagined companionship stimulates intimacy. Similarly, Auter and Davis (1991) and Schlütz et al. (2020) demonstrated that when media characters directly address viewers (break the fourth wall), their enjoyment levels significantly increase. This shows that there is some sort of connection between the mediated other and the viewer that can bring positive psychological experiences and have an effect on their PSR and PSIs.

Moreover, research also showed that PSRs can act as a buffer to real-life emotional hardship (Derrick et al., 2009). Their research showed that people dealing with loneliness, grief, or isolation, parasocial figures can provide a sense of intimacy, proximity, and companionship Derrick et al., discovered that participants who thought about their favourite TV shows after experiencing interpersonal conflict reported feeling less rejected and mood improvements. This suggests that parasocial figures can function as a reliable emotional anchor during difficult times. Additionally, research by Lakey et al. (2014) highlights that observing others' interactions including the interactions on media can have a positive impact and foster a sense of emotional support. Hartmann (2016) notes that this imagined support is similar to the support provided by real-life social ties.

Lotun et al. (2024) looked at the functional role of PSRs and compared them to real-life relationships. They found that strong PSRs were often perceived as more emotionally satisfying than weak real-life relationships. This indicated that PSRs are an essential component of individuals' "social portfolios"(p.211). Lotun et al also found that even though PSRs cannot directly respond to someone, they cannot end the relationship, making it more consistent and dependable. Additionally, even though there can be ruptures in the relationship like character deaths that do impact the viewer, the rupture will affect the viewer less as they can always have access to the content before those incidents. Therefore, PSRs offer resilience as they are emotionally dependable, incapable of betrayal, and easily revisited through old videos or episodes. For people needing consistency, PSRs can act as a secure emotional tie. Lastly, Derrick et al. (2009) asked participants to write about a favourite TV show, movie, or book, finding that this process recreated the feeling of social connection. They found that engaging with fictional worlds or media figures can provide a sense of belonging.

Additionally, for individuals with low self-esteem, PSRs may provide unique benefits. Derrick et al. (2008) found that such individuals felt closer to their "ideal self" through PSRs, which does not usually happen in real relationships. Derrick et al. (2009) and more recently, Khairi et al. (2024) further emphasized that parasocial figures help reduce harsh self-perceptions by serving as relatable or aspirational models. This allows individuals to see themselves more positively or reduce being so harsh on themselves as they can relate to celebrities similar to themselves. Similarly, Lotun et al. (2024) noted that individuals with low self-esteem perceived PSRs as more emotionally responsive. This finding suggests a tendency to rely on one-sided relationships for psychological fulfillment.

PSRs also play a role in motivation, identity formation, and the development of values. de Bérail and Bungener, (2022) looked at "viewer characteristics (such as social anxiety, attachment style, loneliness, and age) with YouTuber video characteristics (such as self-disclosure, physical presence, and fictional content)" (p.170) to understand how PSRs form and develop on YouTube. They identified "three distinct dimensions of PSRs: (1) desire to engage in parasocial processes, (2) feelings of intimacy, and (3) feelings of attraction" (p.171). The study then tested how these dimensions relate to problematic or addictive YouTube use. Overall, the study found that stronger PSR bonds with YouTubers were associated with higher levels of anxiety of viewers and when YouTubers shared more personal thoughts and feelings. Additionally, the findings also showed that the more someone wanted to participate in parasocial interactions, the more likely they were to show signs of YouTube addiction. This suggests that for adolescents and young adults, parasocial figures can model behaviours, provide aspirational goals, and create safe spaces for identity exploration.

PSRs have also been linked to broader positive influences like reducing prejudice and increase motivation (Khairi et al., 2024). Khairi et al. reviewed the relevant studies on the impacts of PSRs on fans and society. They observed that fans of K-pop idols, athletes, and musicians often felt inspired by these figures in ways that improved academic performance and work persistence. This may be because parasocial figures feel emotionally significant to the fans and therefore their opinions and behaviours can have a real influence. PSRs thus serve motivational functions by offering aspirational models that encourage personal growth and resilience.

In sum, PSRs fulfill a wide range of psychological functions as they offer companionship, buffer rejection, foster self-esteem and motivate growth and resilience. These bonds demonstrate the capacity of parasocial connections to improve well-being and contribute meaningfully to an individual's emotional and social life.

Negative Psychological Impacts

While parasocial relationships (PSRs) can provide comfort and connection, they are not always beneficial. In some cases, they can become dysfunctional or even pathological, undermining social skills and overall well-being (Stever, 2017).

PSRs become especially problematic when they begin to replace real-life relationships or when viewers expect reciprocity from what is inherently a one-sided connection (Hartmann, 2016). Hartmann claims that the research is divided on whether PSRs can fully replace other forms of relationships. Hartmann explains that some individuals may not recognize or forget that PSRs are non-reciprocal. As a result, they may start to believe that a genuine relationship exists with a media figure and expect a response in return.

These extreme forms can show up as unhealthy celebrity worship where individuals experience, “compulsive feelings, obsessive thoughts, exaggerated devotion, or even delusional tendencies such as erotomania or stalking” (Maltby et al., 2005., p. 25). These thoughts and behaviours can also negatively interfere with healthy relational development and increase isolation. Supporting this, de Bérail and Bungener (2022) found that PSRs were associated with increased internet addiction and troublesome YouTube use. They defined troublesome YouTube use as a form of behavioral addiction identified by compulsive engagement, inability to control viewing habits, and negatively impacting daily functioning. They found the association stronger when the desire to connect with a media figure fueled negative online interactions. They also noted a stronger effect when individuals with social anxiety or avoidance sought parasocial connections which suggest that vulnerability factors intensify the risk of compulsive use. Related research has also linked PSRs to problematic media use, including excessive screen time, compulsive social media habits, and over-engagement with parasocial content (Gabriel et al., 2017; Hartmann, 2017).

Another area of concern is self-perception. Maltby et al. (2010) found that intense celebrity worship (which is a form of PSR as Maltby et al. found in 2005 that celebrity worship is associated with the consumer thinking about the celebrity and fantasizing or thinking they are in a sort of a relationship with the celebrity) was associated depression and anxiety but also with body image dissatisfaction. Maltby et al. (2010) examined significant associations between celebrity worship and body image concerns. They discovered that with adolescent girls, there was a connection between parasocial bonds and a greater obsession with body shape. Supporting this, Young et al (2012) researched the impacts of PSRs on how people respond to skinny celebrities. This study demonstrated that PSRs can intensify body image concerns when viewers

compare themselves against idealized media figures. However, the researchers also found that participants felt more positive about their bodies after viewing a favourite thin celebrity compared to a thin celebrity they did not particularly care about. This finding supports the idea that PSRs can also help improve body perception depending on the content and the media figure. Furthermore, Zsila et al., (2021) demonstrated that PSRs often intensify body image concerns when viewers compare themselves against idealized media figures. They found that this effect is worsened when individuals are motivated by self-comparison and contributes to lower levels of self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and ongoing struggles with body image.

Moreover, PSRs can be a double-edged sword for trauma-exposed individuals. Gabriel et al. (2017) investigated the use of media figures and fictional worlds as "social surrogates" among trauma-exposed individuals. They found that while social surrogates (e.g., favorite media characters) can provide comfort and companionship for trauma-exposed individuals without PTSD, those with PTSD symptoms also experienced intensified feelings of isolation and disconnection. Therefore, under certain conditions, PSRs can exacerbate emotional distress rather than relieve it.

Another troubling dimension of PSRs is their ability to amplify negative emotional reactions. Eyal and Cohen (2006) focused on "parasocial breakups" (when a show ends, a character dies, or a celebrity's reputation collapses) and how audiences emotionally respond when a parasocial bond with a media figure dissolve. They found that frustration or disillusionment with media figures can provoke emotional reactivity and trigger strong grief reactions. Similarly, Kretz (2020) examined fan reactions to character deaths and found that parasocial breakups can provoke sadness, anger, or frustration similar to real-life relational losses. Even negative PSRs, such as those with disliked media figures, can become emotionally

taxing and generate attachment-related distress like heightened anxiety and emotional avoidance (Bernhold, 2019). Bernhold states that such relationships may be linked to increased loneliness and depressive symptoms.

Lastly, isolation is one of the most consistent concerns in parasocial relationships. Strong parasocial bonds, combined with comparison-based or passive social media use, can deepen feelings of isolation, and heighten depressive symptoms (De Bérail et al., 2019; Seabrook et al., 2016). Research with young adults finds that higher PSR intensity can correlate with greater loneliness and online social anxiety, particularly among individuals who are already socially anxious (Zou et al., 2025; Christy & Adam, 2022; Bernhold, 2019). At the same time, newer studies argue against the purely negative impacts of PSRs. Liu and Lee (2024) researched how PSIs can impact loneliness by acting as a mediator. They highlight that when parasocial bonds offer belonging, emotional regulation, values alignment, or a sense of steady companionship, they can function as protective relationships rather than vulnerabilities. Xie et al (2025) found comparable results when looked at how short-form video platforms can bring out positive effects from the PSRs between the user and the content and how the user relates to the content. They found that consumers can receive support from the content creator as they would from a real-life support.

Finally, PSRs may also affect critical thinking. Breves et al. (2021) demonstrated that strong PSRs with social media influencers can reduce followers' skepticism toward advertising. They discovered that strong PSRs with social media influencers diminished viewers' ability to critically evaluate advertising content even when sponsorship disclosures were provided. This effect is particularly concerning for younger audiences, who may lack developed media literacy skills. Research suggests that PSRs can shape broader beliefs and behaviours. Stehr et al. (2015)

introduced the concept of *Social Opinion Leadership*, where trusted media figures influence followers' values and decisions through mechanisms like emotional orientation and simplification of complex issues. Extending this into organizational contexts, Liao et al. (2021) found that middle managers who formed PSRs with public media figure CEOs reported stronger organizational trust and identification, which in turn predicted greater job satisfaction but also risked uncritical loyalty.

The Role of Social Media in Intensifying PSRs

Social media has transformed the ways PSRs form, deepen, and sustain themselves. While traditional media offered limited only one-way exposure to celebrities and fictional characters, today's platforms like Instagram, YouTube, Tik Tok, Twitch, and podcasts create an imitation of a two-way exchange. Features such as likes, comments, and direct messages can make the connection feel more mutual even though the relationship remains one-sided. This illusion blurs the boundaries between public persona and private identity, which heightens the sense of intimacy between audiences and media figures.

Increased Accessibility and Interaction

Social networking sites foster stronger PSRs by making media figures more accessible and interactions more frequent. Baek et al. (2013) analyzed both social and parasocial relationships on social networking sites and found that they contribute differently to users' psychological well-being. They reported that loneliness predicted a greater number of one-sided relationships with celebrities online, indicating that users often turn to these connections to meet unmet social needs. Building on this, Kim and Song (2016) investigated Twitter and the effects of celebrity self-disclosure on how fans see celebrities. The study demonstrated that celebrity self-disclosure on Twitter strengthened perceptions of social presence which is the feeling of

being in the company of another person. This, in turn, strengthened parasocial interactions and laid the groundwork for longer-lasting PSRs.

Similarly, Bond (2016) looked at the dynamics between social media interactions and the impacts on the PSR in adolescents. The results emphasized that the interaction with celebrities strengthened PSR. Furthermore, the personal, informal tone of social media posts helps fans feel emotionally closer to celebrities and thereby deepening the attachment. Additionally, the intimacy created through frequent updates, behind-the-scenes content, and seemingly authentic self-expression makes audiences feel as though they "know" media figures personally (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). Tukachinsky et al. confirmed that PSRs are closely tied to identification, perceived similarity (homophily), and attraction. All of which are amplified by the interactive nature of social media. They state that PSIs with a celebrity create a feeling of reciprocity and intensify PSRs.

YouTube and Informal Intimacy

YouTube has emerged as a key site for PSR development because of its reliance on vlogs and personal storytelling. Ferchaud et al. (2018) did a quantitative study on the ten most-subscribed YouTube channels to examine how content features and video attributes relate to parasocial perceptions such as authenticity and realism. The researchers found that all forms of self-disclosure were consistently linked to higher perceived authenticity. They also reported that videos showing the creator's face, whether looking directly at the camera or not, were associated with stronger perceptions of authenticity compared to videos where the YouTuber was not on screen.

It appears that adolescents are more sensitive to this dynamic. Balleys et al. (2020) examined the impact of YouTube videos created by teenagers on teenagers. They discovered that

teenagers use YouTube both to see themselves reflected in others (the YouTubers) and to be acknowledged by their peers as individuals of value. This recognition was reinforced by the confessional, personal style of vlogs. By positioning YouTubers as relatable peers rather than distant celebrities, the intimate and self-revealing nature of vlogs blurs the line between personal and mediated relationships. For adolescents in particular, this dynamic intensifies parasocial bonds by creating spaces where they can both *recognize* themselves and feel *recognized* by others. These dynamics suggest that YouTube functions not only as entertainment but also as a social arena for negotiating identity, belonging, and intimacy through parasocial connections.

Additionally, de Bérail and Bungener (2022) identified three key dimensions of PSRs with YouTubers: the "desire to engage, perceived intimacy, and attraction" (p.171). These were especially salient among younger audiences, who are often navigating identity development and turn to YouTube creators for inspiration and guidance. Tolbert and Drogos (2019) provided further evidence of this influence, showing that private messages from YouTubers created stronger parasocial bonds among tweens compared to public comments.

Lastly, research has also shown how PSRs on YouTube intersect with consumer behaviour and education (Beautemps & Bresges., 2022; Lee & Lee, 2022). Lee and Lee studied how PSIs with beauty YouTubers have an impact on buyer intent. They found that PSIs and second-hand experiences shape consumer behaviour by influencing brand trust and willingness to buy. Beautemps and Bresges (2022) extended these findings into education contexts. They showed that PSRs with educational YouTubers increased learning motivation, particularly among female students. This illustrates how parasocial dynamics on YouTube can carry weight across both personal and instrumental domains.

Twitch and Real-Time Engagement

Livestreaming platforms like Twitch take PSRs a step further by enabling synchronous, two-way interactions. Through live chat, emotes, and donation systems, viewers participate in a communal space that feels spontaneous and personal. Wulf et al., (2020) analyzed Twitch streaming and the effects of the parasocial interactions with game streamers. They found that PSIs are central to Twitch streamers' success because interactions with streamers, like responses to the chat, directly influence audience loyalty. In addition, Finch et al. (2019) explored eSports and argued that parasocial dynamics also exist within competitive gaming. They echoed Wulf et al., stating that the real-time and shared aspects of streaming are similar to spending time with friends, thus making PSIs feel especially vivid and authentic.

Podcasts and Companionship

Even though podcasts are audio-only, they foster PSRs through their intimate, conversational style of delivery. Listeners often listen to podcasts during boring routines as it enhances the task, there is a sense of productivity, and they reported a sense of companionship with hosts (Tobin & Guadagno, 2022). Vilceanu (2025) examined listener reviews from shows like *Radiolab* and *This American Life*, finding that podcasts often meet mental, emotional, and communal needs by creating a feeling of friendship with hosts. Podcasts also served as social *surrogates* during the COVID-19 pandemic as they helped listeners feel less isolated (Robson, 2021). These studies underscore the role of PSRs in providing stability and emotional support especially during periods of stress and disruption.

Psychological Costs of Amplified Engagement

Although social media and streaming platforms can foster meaningful connections, they also introduce new risks. The drive to engage in PSRs has been linked to problematic media use. For instance, de Bérail and Bungener (2022) showed that the desire to connect with YouTubers

was associated with addictive patterns of use, particularly among younger audiences still navigating identity development. These users may be especially vulnerable to over-identification and dependency on media figures.

Social media also intensifies the potential for emotional harm. The curated nature of social media can intensify unhealthy comparisons, distort reality, and weaken critical thinking (Khairi et al., 2024). Along with Breves et al. (2021)'s finding of strong PSRs, where influencers reduce critical evaluation of advertising, these findings suggest that social media amplifies the intimacy of PSRs but also heightens their psychological costs and complexities. The interactive, immersive qualities of digital platforms deepen parasocial bonds, but they also magnify their psychological costs and complexities.

Parasocial Relationships with AI Influencers

The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) influencers raises new questions about whether emotional bonds traditionally studied in parasocial relationships (PSRs) can extend to non-human entities. Classic PSI theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) describes how audiences develop one-sided relationships with media figures through repeated exposure and feelings of intimacy. As explored earlier, this theory has traditionally been applied to celebrities or fictional characters but has recently been expanded to examine AI entities, such as virtual influencers and chatbots. This extension is supported by the "Computers as Social Actors" (CASA) paradigm (Nass et al., 1994), which suggests that people instinctively apply social rules from human interactions to their interactions with technology.

A central debate is whether AI influencers can foster parasocial bonds as effectively as human influencers. Critics argue that trust comes from authenticity and moral honesty which are uniquely human qualities (Omeish et al., 2025). However, Omeish et al. found that research

increasingly shows that AI influencers can evoke similar levels of PSI and PSR and even exceed those of human influencers in some contexts. For example, Breves & van Berlo (2025) found that the PSR development rates were the same for both human and virtual influencers, and there was little difference in how audiences experienced each stage (initiation, intensification, and dissolution (parasocial breakups)). They also noted that other features like the content, relatability or story may have a bigger impact than if the influencer is human or not.

It appears that cultural context also plays an important role. Omeish et al. (2025) studied TikTok users in Egypt and Jordan and how AI or human influencers influence PSRs. They reported that AI influencers could successfully generate bonding social capital, sometimes more effectively than human influencers. They noted that human influencers' availability and persona can fluctuate but AI figures provide a stable and predictable engagement which aligns well with collectivist expectations of reliability and consistency. These findings suggest that audiences may value qualities like responsiveness, reliability, and consistency over realness which challenges what counts as authenticity in influencer marketing. However, Rubin et al (2025) found that participants favoured human responses when it came to emotional interactions, which contradicts this finding.

Additionally, the type of relationship people perceive with AI also plays a role. Drawing on relational norms' theory (Clark & Mills, 1993), Qi et al. (2025) distinguished between an "assistant" paradigm, which prioritizes transactional exchanges of information or services, and a "friend" paradigm, which focuses on emotional support and friendship. The results showed that AI, when framed as a friend, elicits stronger parasocial bonds than when framed as an assistant. This outcome was reproduced in a study by Youn and Jin, (2021), who compared friend chatbots and assistant chatbots. They found that friend-like chatbots produced significantly higher

parasocial interaction as long as they were competent. This made users feel more socially connected, be more trusting, and more pleased with the relationship. Therefore, it highlights that the interaction is critical in PSR formation. Similarly, Pelau et al. (2021) found that users in collective, friend-like relationships with AI were more likely to share personal information and exchange-based relationships only encouraged disclosure when the interaction was also enjoyable. Overall, the findings indicate that relationships with AI and those with humans share many similarities.

Taken together, research shows that AI influencers can indeed foster meaningful parasocial connections. Consistency, predictability, and the framing of the interaction appear to be important factors in determining how the audiences perceive AI influencers. However, important questions remain about how deep and enduring parasocial bonds with AI truly are compared to those formed with human figures. Future research will need to examine how parasocial ties with AI develop over longer periods, across cultural contexts, and in relation to broader psychological outcomes. In addition, the growing presence of AI influencers brings up ethical concerns, especially around issues of transparency and the possibility for exploitation or manipulation.

Lastly, some might argue that AI influencers may not fully fall under the category of parasocial relationships because the interaction is not entirely one-sided. Traditional parasocial relationships are defined by their lack of reciprocity. By contrast, AI influencers and chatbots generate outputs in real time and produce a conversational or interactive exchange that is more like a two-way relationship. Although the “other” in this interaction is not human, the presence of responsiveness challenges the classical definition of PSRs and raises the possibility that AI-based engagement represents a distinct relational category; something more like a simulated

social relationship than a purely parasocial one. However, some AI's can act as a specific character or a media figure and that can blur the lines.

Gaps in the Literature

Although the literature on PSRs has grown, it still leaves important questions unanswered. One major gap in many studies is that they rely on quantitative self-report measures that do not capture the subjective, emotional, or narrative aspects of PSRs. Therefore, there is a need for qualitative research that explores the lived experience of parasocial connection, as well as longitudinal designs that trace how PSRs evolve over time.

There also needs to be more experimental research to understand how PSRs are formed and the causes. Within these aspects, the research needs to focus on how media features, personality traits, or emotional states influence the development and outcomes of PSR. If the research can expand further than surveys to include behavioural observations or "think-aloud" protocols, I believe it would bring richer insights.

There is still conceptual confusion around how PSRs differ from concepts like identification, liking, trust, fandom, or celebrity worship. Further research needs to work on clearer frameworks to break apart these overlapping constructs. The research on antagonistic or negative PSRs is also limited, but I believe these also have an emotional impact on individuals.

Lastly, the current research lacks cultural knowledge. It would be important to explore how PSRs show up across different age groups, communities, and countries. Furthermore, the influence of emerging phenomena like the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on mediated connections deserves much more attention. As more people turn to media figures for support and companionship, we need to ask: Are we becoming more isolated, or are we just connecting differently?

Interventions when working with Clients with PSR′s

There is still limited research on direct PSR-specific interventions and most of it exists in adjacent areas like problematic social media use, celebrity worship, and body image/media literacy work. As discussed earlier, PSRs have only recently started appearing in mental health conversations. Therefore, clinicians still need to draw from broader therapeutic research and adapt it to the parasocial context. However, good news is that there are meaningful evidence base clinicians can lean on that overlap heavily with PSR dynamics.

Psychoeducation

Recent literature increasingly recognizes that PSRs are a normal part of development for adolescents and young adults exploring identity and belonging (Bond et al., 2025). As mentioned in earlier chapters, PSRs can genuinely support self-concept, belonging, and coping (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). But they can also drift into unhealthy territory when they start replacing reciprocal relationships or reinforcing distorted beliefs.

Recent clinical discussions point to psychoeducation as the starting and most important point for working with PSRs (Diaz et al., 2025). Diaz et al. found that helping adolescent clients identify the PSRs, and education to understand how they work psychologically, enabled them to distinguish adaptive from harmful patterns can reduce shame and open up deeper conversations.

Diaz et al. (2025) also suggested that interventions could range from brief psychoeducation to deeper psychotherapy depending on the client's case. They highlight Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) as a helpful modality when PSRs are tied to anxiety or problems with social skills. They emphasize that the PSR itself is not the issue and but could be a tool to investigate the client's thoughts. Then, CBT could be used to help clients map out the thoughts, expectations, and behaviours around the relationship.

As previously mentioned, research also shows that watching or thinking about a favourite TV program can temporarily soothe loneliness or rejection (Derrick et al., 2009). This aligns well with a psychoeducational stance that validates how PSRs can comfort people emotionally while still encouraging curiosity about the broader relational picture.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)

CBT interventions and building alternative reinforcing activities can help reduce negative affect like anxiety that leads to PSRs (Curtiss et al., 2021; de Berail et al., 2019). CBT can strengthen emotional regulation by helping clients understand their thought process and recognize the needs the celebrity bond is compensating for (e.g., loneliness, identity confusion, rejection sensitivity). This understanding could help develop healthier coping strategies.

For clients whose PSRs show signs of escalating into obsessive patterns, there is relevant evidence from celebrity worship research. McCutcheon et al, (2002) absorption–addiction model, later expanded by Aruguete et al.'s (2014), frames "borderline pathological" celebrity worship as an extreme form of parasocial bonding. Arguete et al state that consumers may become addicted to a celebrity as celebrity worship can fulfill something missing in the individuals' lives. Similarly, Maltby et al. (2003) and Maltby et al., (2006) link these higher levels of celebrity worship to anxiety, depression, obsessive traits, and fantasy proneness. Sansone and Sansone (2014) looked a post-secondary student and found students with stronger celebrity worship had similar psychosocial traits. They note clinical observations of concerns about body image, interest in plastic surgeries, tendencies toward compulsive shopping, and other psychological challenges that were related to celebrity worship.

These findings highlight the importance of screening not just the PSR itself but the role or function of the PSR and what needs it meets. CBT is well-suited for addressing this as it

targets the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural patterns that keep these connections strong and stressful (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). Clients may have distorted beliefs about the celebrity or themselves, and CBT can help unpack these thoughts through thought-challenging interventions.

Additionally, clients may be struggling with comparison loops that may prompt the unhealthy PSR (Sansone & Sansone, 2014). CBT can assist clients in figuring out these loops and replace them with more balanced self-images and responses.

Media Literacy and Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking skills can play a major protective role in how people form and navigate parasocial relationships. Earlier research has shown that PSRs can sometimes contribute to distorted self-evaluations, poor decision-making, and unhelpful social comparisons, especially when media figures model unrealistic lifestyles or risky behaviors (e.g., Giles & Maltby, 2004; Greenwood & Long, 2011; Swami et al., 2011). Strengthening media literacy helps clients step back and evaluate the intentions, production choices, and commercial pressures behind the content they consume. It also supports them in recognizing curated images, influencer marketing strategies, and the emotional hooks that often intensify parasocial bonds.

Vahedi et al (2018) did a meta-analysis on research on media literacy interventions alongside studies evaluating how effective these programs are at shifting thoughts related to risky health behaviors. They found that media literacy reduces risky health behaviours as it teaches and promotes critical thinking which leads to making better choices by reducing vulnerability to harmful attitudes or risky behavioral intentions.

Additionally, meta-analytic work on the media-literacy interventions found that interventions were effective on improving critical thinking (Jeong et al., 2012). Kurtz et al., 2025 and Guest et al., 2022 found that media literacy programs helped decrease body dissatisfaction

and enhance consumer's abilities to critically analyze the content. They both highlighted that interventions that challenged and reform their cognitive processes added to the positive outcomes regarding body image. This highlights the importance of psychoeducation and media literacy as clients will be able to help clients re-interpret its meaning. The key is to not eliminate the PSR, but to building these skills in therapy that will empower clients to stay connected to the media while remaining grounded, self-aware, and better able to differentiate supportive PSRs from those that may reinforce negative thinking or unhealthy choices.

Strategies for Loneliness

Lastly, isolation is one of the most consistent concerns in parasocial relationships. Strong parasocial bonds, combined with comparison-based or passive social media use, can deepen feelings of isolation, and heighten depressive symptoms (De Bérail et al., 2019; Seabrook et al., 2016). Research with young adults finds that higher PSR intensity can correlate with greater loneliness and online social anxiety, particularly among individuals who are already socially anxious (Zou et al., 2025; Christy & Adam, 2022; Bernhold, 2019). At the same time, newer studies argue against the purely negative impacts of PSRs. Liu and Lee (2024) researched how PSIs can impact loneliness by acting as a mediator. They highlight that when parasocial bonds offer belonging, emotional regulation, values alignment, or a sense of steady companionship, they can function as protective relationships rather than vulnerabilities. Xie et al (2025) found comparable results when looked at how short-form video platforms can bring out positive effects from the PSRs between the user and the content and how the user relates to the content. They found that consumers can receive support from the content creator as they would from a real-life support.

With this understanding, counsellors play an important role. Instead of pathologizing PSRs, clinicians can help clients understand how these connections function and use them as a tool to improve clients' wellbeing while watching out for negative patterns. Masi et al., 2013 looked at different strategies to reduce loneliness and emphasized for "1) improving social skills, 2) enhancing social support, 3) increasing opportunities for social contact, and 4) addressing maladaptive social cognition" (p.220). Knowing this, PSRs can serve as a supportive bridge to improve clients' loneliness and well-being while they build confidence to approach real-life connections. Clinicians can use PSRs provide space for clients to practice engagement, reduce intimidation, and move towards in-person relationships and supports at a pace that feels safe for them.

Chapter Summary

This chapter, I reviewed the current literature on parasocial relationships (PSRs) by looking at how they develop, what they offer people psychologically, and how they show up across different digital spaces. I started by clarifying the difference between parasocial interaction (PSI) and PSRs as those terms are often used interchangeably. I highlighted the importance of differentiating between the two as PSIs are momentary feelings of connection, while PSRs are longer-term bonds. This understanding is essential for accurately interpreting how these relationships operate especially in counselling settings. I also explored three theoretical frameworks—Attachment Theory, Object Relations Theory, and Social Development Theory—that help make sense of why PSRs feel so real and emotionally significant. Each theory contributes a slightly different perspective but together they show how PSRs can serve as extensions of relational needs, tend to attachment insecurities, or to explore identity, values, and social learning in a relatively safe and low-risk way. Following this, I explored the positive and

negative psychological impacts of PSRs. On the positive side, PSRs can offer comfort, companionship, and emotional regulation, and can help people navigate loneliness, self-esteem, or identity development. At the same time, the literature also highlighted the risks especially when PSRs start replacing real-life relationships or become overly intense. This can lead to dependency, exacerbate self-comparisons, compulsive media use, and increased emotional distress during a parasocial break up. Lastly, I discussed how clinicians can meaningfully utilize parasocial context to help guide clients in building positive parasocial and social relationship by using PSRs as a therapeutic bridge.

Taken together, the chapter demonstrated that PSRs are complex and deeply human, with both therapeutic value and psychological risk. The findings point to critical gaps in the literature especially the need for better measurement, longitudinal research, and culturally diverse perspectives in relation to emerging technologies. These gaps create the foundation for the questions and direction taken up in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Summary, Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusions

Summary of Findings

Across the literature reviewed in Chapters 1 and 2, parasocial relationships (PSRs) consistently show up as emotionally meaningful one-sided connections that can support or complicate someone's mental health. In this capstone, I examined PSRs through an attachment, internalized relational pattern, and identity development perspective and seen to function in ways that feel similar to in-person relationships. They can provide comfort, companionship, stability, and a sense of belonging, especially during moments of loneliness or interpersonal distress (Hartmann, 2016; Derrick et al., 2009; Lotun et al., 2024). At the same time, PSRs can contribute to challenges such as unhealthy media use, self-comparison, body image concerns, and emotional distress when the relationship "ends" or shifts (Maltby et al., 2005; de Bérail & Bungener, 2022).

Furthermore, it was evident that social media platforms amplify these dynamics by making media figures more accessible and interactive. This intensifies the feeling of intimacy which can feed parasocial connections in unhealthy ways. YouTube, livestreaming, short-form video, social media self-disclosure, and even AI-driven characters all create environments where a PSR can feel mutual or personal even though the relationship remains one-sided. Overall, the research shows that PSRs have become a meaningful and normal part of development. PSRs are neither inherently harmful nor inherently beneficial, and the relationship can fluctuate depending on the emotional needs, vulnerabilities, and social context of the person engaging with them. This idea is important for counselling settings because PSRs can reveal a client's attachment needs, identity themes, coping patterns, and internalized relational expectations which can later be used to improve their mental health.

Discussion/Implications

Taken together, the findings suggest several broad implications for counsellors, clients, families, and mental-health systems. One of the clearest takeaways is that counsellors need to treat PSRs as real emotional relationships rather than insignificant or fake attachments. The literature repeatedly shows that PSRs are developmentally normal, especially for adolescents and young adults, and can play a meaningful role in their psychological growth (Bond et al., 2025; Hoffner & Bond, 2022). For counsellors, this means approaching PSRs with curiosity, not judgment. They need to remember that PSRs can offer valuable insight into a client's attachment patterns, their unmet needs, the kind of relational stability they seek, and the traits or values they identify with or aspire toward. As people often process PSRs similarly to real relationships, these bonds can act as an invitation for conversations about connection, longing, fear of rejection, comparison, or grief.

Clients can benefit when PSRs are normalized. Many individuals may experience shame around caring deeply about media figures or fictional characters. Therefore, normalizing PSRs create a safer therapeutic environment where clients can openly reflect on why a particular figure feels comforting, aspirational, or regulating. This understanding also supports clients in recognizing potential harms or negative interactions as they can map out and recognize the function of the PSR in their lives. Families can benefit from understanding PSRs more accurately, as it can help members understand development and the role these relationships play. Being open and inviting to conversations about a media figure can help people's mental health, especially adolescents and young adults, as it minimizes shame, creates acceptance, and opens opportunities to support them in ways meaningful to them.

At the organizational and educational level, the findings highlight the need for training programs to begin including PSRs into counselling practices. PSRs are highly relevant to digital well-being, identity development, and emerging relational norms, yet they are rarely included in clinical assessment or case conceptualization models. Considering the rise of AI influencers and social media personas, organizations also need to consider how digital intimacy intersects with client vulnerability, advertising, and identity. From a broader societal perspective, policymakers might need to address the impact of social media marketing, unrealistic beauty standards, and the increasing presence of AI personas. These figures and ideals have huge impacts on individuals, especially in contexts where youth are highly engaged. Therefore, it is important for organizations and policymakers to understand the capacity of PSRs.

Overall, the implications point toward a shift in how to help mental health professionals understand and work with PSRs. Therapists should not see PSRs as distractions but recognize them as meaningful psychological material that often mirrors clients' inner worlds and connections.

Recommendation(s) or Proposal

This capstone proposes a group educational workshop for counsellors focused on understanding and integrating PSRs into therapeutic practice. This workshop is designed to help counsellors recognize the complexity and clinical benefits of PSRs, reduce stigma, and develop practical skills for assessment and intervention. The core message of the workshop is that PSRs should not be corrected, minimized, or pathologized but considered an opportunity for further therapeutic benefit.

The workshop would begin with a clear explanation of PSRs and the theories that support them (Attachment Theory, Object Relations, and Social Development Theory). From there,

counsellors would learn how to assess PSRs in practice by exploring what the PSR provides the client, when the client turns to it, how it functions, and its effects on real-life relationships. Before intervening, counsellors need to understand the function of the parasocial connection, the emotional reasoning behind it, and how it can benefit or hurt the client. The workshop would begin by normalizing PSRs as a common and developmentally typical experience. Then, there would be clarification and education on the difference between PSI and PSR so clinicians can more accurately conceptualize what type of connection the client is describing.

Moving on, the workshop would teach counsellors to use PSRs as a therapeutic tool to gain a deeper understanding of the client's worldview. As PSRs often mirror real attachment needs or unresolved relational patterns, they can act as an invitation for certain sensitive conversations. For example, this could look like discussing grief through a character death or exploring the ideal self through admired celebrities.

Counsellors will learn to assess PSRs by exploring questions such as:

- What is the PSR meeting or protecting? What function does it serve?
- How does it connect to the client′s attachment history?
- Is the PSR regulating or avoiding?
- Is social comparison causing stress, especially around body image?
- Are there comorbidities (e.g., trauma, anxiety, depression, ASD, ADHD)?
    - How does that shape the PSR?
    - How does it impact their anxiety, depression, loneliness?
- How does media use interact with the client′s mood, sensory needs, or coping patterns?

The workshop helps clinicians move from surface behaviour ("they're obsessed with a celebrity") to relational meaning ("this figure is acting as a stable attachment object or a transitional space for identity exploration"). This includes exploring client fantasies, narratives, and identification themes, and understanding how media features (self-disclosure, algorithms, curated content, livestreaming) intensify perceived closeness. A major goal is helping therapists reduce shame around PSRs so that clients feel safe discussing them openly.

After the conversations, clinicians can incorporate different intervention strategies based on the client's needs. This could include psychoeducation, attachment-informed case conceptualization, CBT techniques, media literacy to support critical thinking, and loneliness-reduction strategies. They can also utilize PSRs as a starting point for social reconnection.

Interventions taught in the workshop would include:

- Using psychoeducation to normalize PSRs, reduce shame, and differentiate supportive vs harmful engagement.
- Challenging core beliefs or thoughts around ideals, self-image, or expectations.
- Reframing unhealthy ideals by exploring projection and internalized object dynamics.
- Media literacy strategies like analyzing content, understanding algorithms, and recognizing marketing strategies.
- Supporting clients in developing healthier habits and more balanced cognitive understandings.
- Helping clients build more balanced social connections where PSRs supplement instead of replacing offline connections.
- Behavioural activation techniques and building relational skills in line with PSR exploration.
- Gradual exposure to real-life connections at a pace that feels safe and manageable.

- Reinforcing belonging in offline spaces: community, friendships, identity-affirming environments.

It would be important for clinicians to give special attention to clients who are neurodivergent or have developmental delays. In these scenarios, PSRs may serve as stabilizing, predictable, or regulating experiences. Ultimately, therapists would be encouraged to view these patterns through a strengths-based lens.

The workshop will also include dedicated time for clinicians to discuss, reflect, and brainstorm together about how to navigate the complex roles of PSRs. As no client is the same, it would be crucial to provide space for therapists to collaborate on what they have experienced in their practice. Additionally, therapists need to hold the tension between PSRs as supportive, regulating relationships and PSRs as avoidant or limiting coping strategies. This reflective space is meant to help counsellors practice holding that complexity and recognize that many PSRs contain both comfort and avoidance, connection and escape, stability, and longing.

Overall, the workshop aims to give counsellors a framework that is non-pathologizing, attachment-informed, and culturally responsive, while equipping them with concrete strategies they can immediately bring into the therapy room.

Limitations to the Capstone

Along with the gaps in the literature, this capstone has several notable limitations. First, as the literature this capstone was based on is predominantly quantitative and focused on adolescent and student samples, it limits how much we can generalize findings to different age groups and different experiences. Second, I did not explore PSRs among the neurodivergent population or people with developmental disorders. This is a major limitation because many individuals on the autism spectrum, or neurodivergent individuals or individuals with down

syndrome may engage with media figures differently and their experiences may not align with neurotypical interpretations of PSRs. Therefore, future research should intentionally include these groups.

Third, due to the fact that PSR-specific therapeutic research is limited, many of the recommended interventions are taken from overlapping fields such as celebrity worship, media literacy, and problematic internet use. These overlaps are strong but more direct clinical research is needed to fully understand PSRs in a therapeutic setting. Lastly, it is important to recognize the pace of technological development (especially with AI) means that the literature may quickly become outdated. With this in mind, future research will need to balance established yet still-relevant work with the most recent studies. Researchers should also be mindful that some foundational findings may no longer apply or may look different because of the rapid technological change.

Intersection Consideration

The literature shows clear gaps in intersectional representation. Most studies rely on specific samples like a certain age group or a specific population. This leaves out diverse cultural experiences across different cultures. For example, longitudinal studies that examine how PSRs change over time or a comparison between the K-pop fandom in Asian cultures against Western cultures. It would be interesting to see how media figures impact immigrant populations and the role PSRs play on representation, grounding, or belonging. There is also a limited understanding of how PSRs operate for queer, gender-diverse, racialized, disabled, or neurodivergent individuals who may rely on PSRs for safety, identity affirmation, or companionship. These gaps highlight the need for culturally safer methods and research designs that account for language, community, and accessibility.

Conclusion

In writing this capstone, it deepened my understanding of PSRs as meaningful, emotionally impactful relationships that deserve space in clinical work. Researching this topic validated my earlier parasocial experiences and brought a deeper understanding. This capstone confirmed that PSRs reflect clients' inner lives in ways that are often easier for them to express than their in-person relationships. Exploring PSRs can illuminate attachment patterns, unmet needs, internalized hopes, fears, and values. It can also challenge counsellors to expand their understanding of what connection looks like in a digital world.

This process has also clarified how personal this topic is for me. My own experiences with PSRs helped me see how comforting, inspiring, and stabilizing these relationships can be, but also taught me to be mindful of the potential harms. Writing this capstone has reinforced my belief that good counselling meets clients where they are, and this can be done by including the internal and imagined relationships that form how they feel, cope, and grow.

Ultimately, integrating PSR-informed approaches into mental-health practice encourages counsellors to be more curious, culturally responsive, and attuned to the evolving ways of connection in everyone's lives. As digital spaces continue to shift how we relate, this work invites therapists to stay open, reflective, and willing to explore the connections that support clients' healing—even when those connections live on a screen.

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