
THEORETICAL INTEGRATION ESSAY

Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research

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This paper considers the phenomenon of parasocial interaction (PSI) used by media researchers to describe the relationship between media users and media figures (from celebrities to fictional characters). Although the concept has been used consistently across the past two decades in media research, it is argued here that it has not been sufficiently developed at a theoretical level to be taken up by psychologists. A number of key issues have not been addressed: firstly, how PSI might, as its originators put it, be “integrated into the matrix of usual social activity” (Horton & Wohl, 1956); secondly, how PSI might vary according to different types of media figure; and thirdly, what processes over time and media use bind user and figure into a “parasocial relationship.” In this paper the existing literature on PSI is extensively reviewed, and an original model of PSI is developed for use in future social psychological research, which places PSI within the realm of ordinary social interaction and suggests ways in which different media use and different types of media figure interact to produce different styles of relationship. Finally, some applications of more detailed research into PSI are suggested.

The concept of parasocial interaction has become fairly well established in the media and communication literature in the four decades since its first appearance in a paper by Horton and Wohl (1956). This article discusses ways in which the interaction between users of mass media and representations of humans appearing in the media (“media figures,” such as presenters, actors, and celebrities) can produce a form of *parasocial* relationship, to which the user responds as though in a typical social relationship. The authors conclude by

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suggesting that social psychologists “learn in detail how these parasocial interactions are integrated into the matrix of usual social activity” (p. 225). For various reasons, this suggestion has yet to be taken up in earnest, but in the course of this article I suggest some ways in which parasocial interaction may be viewed as “usual social activity.”

Although a profoundly psychological topic, the implications of parasocial interaction have received little consideration from psychologists, and it was not until the 1980s that Alan Rubin and other researchers began to develop the concept extensively within the field of communication science. However, the concept of parasocial interaction, and detailed examination of the behavioral phenomena that it seeks to explain, have considerable potential for developing psychological theory. In keeping with the call by Reeves and Anderson (1991) for the study of media to enrich psychology, this article is an attempt to extract key findings from the media and communication literature, and to construct a model for use in psychological research.

PARASOCIAL INTERACTION (PSI) AS A MEDIA PHENOMENON

The literature review begins by charting the development of PSI as a research concept in mass communication literature, although its origins lie in the field of psychiatry.

Following the Horton and Wohl (1956) paper, there was little significant interest in PSI until the advent of the uses and gratifications approach to mass communication research in the early 1970s (McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972; Rosengren & Windahl, 1972). In a study of a British television audience, McQuail et al. (1972) found many of the phenomena described by Horton and Wohl appearing in viewer responses to early soap opera. Following a car crash in Coronation Street, a viewer commented, “You feel as if they had been in a real road accident and you’d like to do something for them” (p. 157). The authors identified two essential functions of PSI: companionship and personal identity. Soap characters frequently reminded viewers of people they knew, and viewers used characters’ situations and behavior as ways of understanding their own lives.

In a typology of audience–media figure relations, Rosengren and Windahl (1972) argued that PSI could be identified when a viewer interacted with a media figure, but did not identify with the figure. This is an important distinction, because identification has a longer history than PSI, deriving initially from psychoanalytic theory. For Rosengren and Windahl, like McQuail et al., PSI’s most important function was as a source of alternative companionship, resulting from “deficiencies” in social life and dependency on television (i.e., as compensation for loneliness).

Subsequent Scandinavian research in the 1970s argued in favor of broadening audience-media figure research to include PSI, identification and "capture" (where the viewer both interacts and identifies with the figure), integrating these functions into more general "media interaction" (Nordlund, 1978). The idea of PSI as a functional alternative to social interaction was not supported by data collected from Swedish adolescents, marking something of a hiatus in Scandinavian PSI research (Rosengren, Windahl, Hakansson, & Johnsson-Smaragdi, 1976).

The next major development in PSI research took place in North America, with Mark Levy's (1979) important study of older adults and local television news. Levy conducted a number of focus group interviews concerning, among other things, viewers' PSI with newscasters, and used this data to construct a 42-item psychometric scale to measure strength of PSI with local newscasters. This scale was correlated with a number of demographic variables in a sample of viewers in a broader age band. Among the items most strongly agreed with were, "I compare my own ideas with those of newscasters" and "When the newscasters joke around with each other it makes the programme easier to watch." Of the demographic variables, education was strongly negatively correlated with PSI ($r = -.51$), but other variables were not significantly related when education was taken into account.

Most subsequent PSI research has been conducted in the psychometric tradition of uses and gratifications research, where PSI has been entered alongside other behavioral variables into models predicting media use. Most of these studies have operationally defined PSI by using variations on a scale devised by A. M. Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985), henceforth referred to as the PSI scale. The original 29-item instrument was constructed using a number of Levy's (1979) items and other items based on previous PSI research. Following its use with an adult sample ($n = 329$), nine redundant items were eliminated, resulting in acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = .93$). A single factor solution best described the data, with the factor accounting for 45.7% of the variance. This study continued the theme of measuring PSI with newscasters and replicated the earlier Scandinavian findings that PSI did not seem to be associated with loneliness.

Later studies have used variations on the 20-item scale to measure PSI with soap characters (A. M. Rubin & Perse, 1987), comedians (Auter, 1992), TV shopping hosts (Grant, Guthrie, & Ball-Rokeach, 1991), and favorite television personalities of any type (R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Turner, 1993). A. M. Rubin and Perse (1987) reduced the scale further, to 10 items, and the short version was found to have high internal reliability, and high correlation with the 20-item scale. The 10-item version has been used in a number of subsequent studies, notably by Perse and R. B. Rubin (1989) and Conway and A. M. Rubin (1991). The latter study found

that PSI was associated with most viewing motives, and was a better predictor of television use than many other behavioral measures; indeed, the authors argued that PSI may be a more important viewing motivation than program content itself.

Studies using the PSI scale have found that perceived realism, and attraction to the media figure, were highly correlated with the measure (A. M. Rubin et al., 1985; A. M. Rubin & Perse, 1987, R. B. Rubin & McHugh, 1987), which suggests that media users evaluate media figures along similar criteria to people they encounter in the flesh. Television dependency and the amount of time spent watching television have also been found to correlate with PSI (Gleich, 1997; Grant, Guthrie, & Ball-Rokeach, 1991; A. M. Rubin et al., 1985; Vorderer, 1996;), which is important from a uses and gratifications perspective, and also for cultivation theory (Cohen, 1999). However for many variables, particularly demographic variables, there is less consistency across studies. For example, PSI scores have not always correlated with viewing alone, and there are mixed findings with respect to age, gender, and education level.

In the majority of studies the data is best described by a single factor solution, often accounting for over 30% of total variance, but an interesting exception is the study by Gleich (1997), who argued that PSI may not be a unitary concept. This study was carried out using a German sample (the majority of these studies have been conducted in North America), and three factors seem to account for most of the variance.

Firstly, companionship describes many of the items: These are perhaps those aspects of PSI that gratify a need for social interaction, for example, "I feel as if I am part of their group." The second factor, person-program interaction, concerns items that are directly related to programme content, for example, "If X appeared on another program I would watch it." The third factor, empathetic interaction, refers to items that imply some degree of behavioral or affective response, such as verbally addressing the media figure, or feeling embarrassed when they make a mistake. Gleich found that the scores for these items differentiated the German sample from the U.S. sample of A. M. Rubin et al. (1985). This may be a reflection of broader cultural differences between these audiences, or variations in broadcasting tradition, with U.S. presenters and anchors perhaps addressing the camera in ways more likely to promote affective viewer responses.

Another German study (Vorderer, 1996) also found that a three-factor solution best described the data obtained from a modified version of the PSI. The item loadings in this analysis were similar to the Gleich study, except that the three factors were interpreted, respectively, as "quasisocial relationship" (items relating to interaction that was similar to social interaction), unique media relationships (items peculiar to mediated interaction) and "star relationships" (items that were more indicative of relationships with celebrities, such as "I find X attractive").

A more recent challenge to the notion that PSI represents a unitary concept has been made by Auter and Palmgreen (2000), who have developed a multidimensional measure of PSI, the Audience–Persona Interaction (API) Scale. Forty seven initial items were derived from an open-ended questionnaire, and these were reduced to 22, with acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = .84$). Data collected from a high school sample were best described by a four-factor solution, the factors being interpreted as identification with a favorite character; interest in a favorite character; interaction with a group of favorite characters (e.g., a sitcom family); and a favorite character's problem-solving abilities. This measure differs notably from previous PSI scales in considering "group identification" as a characteristic of PSI, measured by items such as "The characters' interactions are similar to mine with my friends." Overall API scores correlated with total viewing time, dependency on television, and perception of TV as reality.

In addition to Likert-type scales, other PSI studies have used semantic differential scales (Auter & Davis, 1991; Koenig & Lessan, 1985), and repertory grids (Gleich, 1997). Finally, a small number of studies have used different qualitative approaches (Alperstein, 1991; Papa et al., 2000; Sood & Rogers, 2000).

PARASOCIAL INTERACTION AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL PHENOMENON

So far, the literature in this review has been drawn almost exclusively from media and communication research, the one striking exception being the original Horton and Wohl (1956) paper. So far, psychologists have shown little interest in the concept, yet it raises many important questions about social psychology, and the nature of relationships that are problematic for existing theories in those fields. Furthermore, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of media in psychological research (Kirschner & Kirschner, 1997; Livingstone, 1998).

The PSI research to date, although not conducted under the explicit banner of psychology, contains many issues of considerable interest to psychologists, both those interested in the psychology of the media, and those working in the broader fields of social psychology and relationship theory.

Similarities Between PSI and Social Interaction

A number of studies have addressed a key psychological issue for PSI; namely, how similar are parasocial relations to ordinary social relations? It seems likely that, once we have made a person judgement about a media figure, or attributed

person characteristics to that figure (e.g., an anthropomorphized cartoon animal), then we will subsequently respond to that figure “as if” it occupies our physical space, thereby becoming incorporated into our social network. If this is the case, then we might expect to identify similar psychological processes underpinning the course of parasocial relationships to those found in face-to-face relationships.

R. B. Rubin and McHugh (1987) examined the importance of social, task, and physical attraction for the development of parasocial relationships with favorite television performers in an undergraduate sample. They found that social attraction (i.e., the media figure could be a friend) was a more important motivating factor in developing a parasocial relationship than physical attraction. Perse and R. B. Rubin (1989) applied uncertainty-reduction theory to the development of parasocial relationships and found that higher levels of attributional confidence were associated with greater “parasocial complexity” measured by descriptions of favorite and disliked soap opera characters. Turner (1993) examined PSI from the perspective of homophily and found that similarity was an important factor in the strength of the parasocial relationship, particularly in relation to attitudes, appearance, and background. However these effects varied according to the type of media figure.

More recently, Gleich (1996) has compared ratings of relationship quality made toward media figures with those made toward friends and neighbors. On most dimensions (confidence, proximity, idealism, strength of character), respondents’ best friends were evaluated considerably higher than favorite media figures, but the ratings for a “guter nachbar” (good neighbor) and favorite media figure were much closer than those for friends. Indeed, on some dimensions (passion and sociability), favorite media figures were rated more highly than good neighbors.

Generally, it seems that many attributes of PSI are similar to those of social interaction. This is not surprising; as A. M. Rubin and Perse (1987) argued, PSI may arise from an altruistic human instinct to form attachments with others, at no matter how remote a distance. From an evolutionary perspective, Reeves and Nass (1996) argued that this is an example of the “media equation” where social responses are automatically elicited by any cues that are related to human characteristics (such as the appearance of a human face on a screen).

Despite the noted parallels between social and parasocial interaction, the status of parasocial relationships as *relationships* is doubtful if using long-established definitions of relationships, such as Hinde (1979), who argued that “a relationship exists only when the probable course of future interactions between the participants differs from that between strangers” (p. 16). In a parasocial relationship the media user is a “stranger” throughout. In order to develop

research into parasocial relationships, therefore, it may be necessary to redefine relationships in general.

Surprisingly, key social psychological theories of interaction and relationships have only been adapted slowly to account for technological influences on social behavior. Some research has been conducted on computer-mediated relationships (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Parks & Roberts, 1998). However, this work has been less concerned with challenging fundamental notions of relationships than with exploring the internet as a means of facilitating traditional relationships (e.g., use of internet dating sites). Other researchers have praised the internet for its "liberating" potential (e.g., Turkle, 1995), where one can try out different identities, freed from physical constraints of age, gender, or ethnicity, although this cuts both ways, and we can also be misled and exploited by other users similarly masquerading under "false" identities (Wallace, 1999). The most significant challenge to the study of relationships as face-to-face phenomena to date has come from Rohlfsing (1995) and Lea and Spears (1995), whose work on long-distance relationships and cyberfriends raised questions about the need for proximity to form emotionally close relationships, and about the role of fantasy in relationship development.

Can on-line interaction be regarded as functionally equivalent to face-to-face social interaction? Papachrissi and A. M. Rubin (2000) investigated the possibility that individuals who find face-to-face interaction unrewarding use the internet as a functional alternative. They found some support for this hypothesis, in that those internet users who found interpersonal communication most rewarding were more likely to use the net for information or entertainment, whereas those who were most socially anxious were more likely to use on-line newsgroups and chat rooms.

This finding would seem to conflict with some of the earlier research that failed to find support for the argument that PSI was a functional alternative to social interaction (Rosengren et al., 1976; A. M. Rubin et al., 1985). However, on-line communication and parasocial interaction are only alike in that the interactants are distant from one another. As Wellman (1996) argued, an internet user group is effectively a social network, especially when communication is synchronous (e.g., chat rooms). In such groups, interaction is reciprocal, at least until the group reaches a particular size (Haythornthwaite, Wellman, & Garton, 1998).

In a study of listeners to talk radio, Armstrong and A. M. Rubin (1989) found that those listeners who actually made calls to the show also found face-to-face interaction less rewarding than those who merely listened. This finding suggests that mediated social interaction can be regarded as a functional alternative to face-to-face interaction, but only when it shares the principle of reciprocity (a

talk radio caller actually engages in synchronous communication with the show's host and/or guests), and—as with on-line socializing—this is qualitatively different from PSI.

Although Lea and Spears (1995) argued that the existence of cyber-relationships implies that all relationships need to be “socially situated,” the concept of parasocial relationships seems to imply the opposite. Here, the imaginary relationship alone is sufficient. This is clearly not the case in all parasocial relationships, however; much of the time, there is always a remote possibility of meeting the media figure, and the function of fan clubs and organizations may provide direct access.

For these reasons, it is important to consider the relative functions of different types of media figure. A fully comprehensive theory of PSI needs to distinguish between media figures who are direct representations of real people (such as newscasters), and fictional creations, whether dramatic characters played by actors, or fantasy figures with “low modality” such as cartoon characters (Hodge & Tripp, 1986). It is always possible for the media user to encounter some of these figures in the physical realm, whereas others must necessarily remain imaginary. Until such contact has been established, however, the nature of the relationship remains parasocial for the media user.

At one level, this is a philosophical issue regarding the authenticity of mediated experience. A number of authors (notably Picirillo, 1986) argued that, for the viewer, the mediated experience is a real experience. The implication that PSI is “imaginary,” or “pseudo-social,” pathologizes viewers who form strong parasocial attachments. Nevertheless, the “imaginary” position is often held by viewers themselves, who may fervently deny the reality of their attachment, possibly as a consequence of the “third-person effect” (Davison, 1983). A study of responses to the deaths of Princess Diana and the British TV presenter Jill Dando found several instances of profound confusion from fans who had never appreciated the extent of their parasocial relationships (Giles & Naylor, 2000).

In summary, there appears to be a strong case for citing PSI in the domain of social psychology (or, to be precise, relationship psychology), albeit at the individual (social cognitive) level. However, such a position runs the risk of creating a psychopathological dimension to PSI. To avoid this happening, it is now necessary to consider how PSI might be treated as an extension of normal social activity.

PSI as a Dimension of Normal Social Behavior

As Perse and R. B. Rubin (1989) pointed out, people use fundamentally the same cognitive processes in both interpersonal and mediated communication

(specifically, in their study, personal constructs and uncertainty reduction). Indeed, Horton and Strauss (1957) suggested that a form of PSI exists even in face-to-face social situations where there are large audiences (at a show or a lecture), where there is a large gap in status between performer and audience.

This is an important consideration for the study of PSI at a psychological level, because, as suggested earlier, there are many situations in which the user-figure relation is ambiguous. In normal social interaction there may be a degree of PSI (e.g., a schoolboy develops a "crush" on a classmate with whom he has never directly interacted). In mediated interaction there are elements of direct interaction (for example, talking to a presenter or celebrity guest on a phone-in show). If these intermediate positions suggest some sort of continuum of social interaction, with full face-to-face interaction at one end, and PSI with a cartoon character or a fictional protagonist at the other end, then this may constitute a new way of theorizing about social interaction in general.

A further consideration is the study of relationships at the individual level. Social cognitive approaches are, by definition, the study of social interaction as individual cognitive activity. It is normally accepted that this approach is inadequate by itself for the study of relationships (Duck, 1994). However, there is a small but growing literature on the role of imagination in social interaction (Caughey, 1984; Honeycutt, 1993). These studies suggest that individuals plan, and rehearse, interaction with others, and that this imaginative activity may be an influential factor in the outcome of real social interaction. Such cognitive activity may originate in the imaginary friends of childhood, which are often created to satisfy a need for companionship, usually in the absence of other siblings (Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup, 2000; Taylor, 1999). However, no data exists to support the hypothesis that television has led to a decline in imaginary companions.

What seems certain, in fact, is that PSI is not exclusively a modern-day phenomenon. The work of James Caughey (1984) is important in this respect; he has catalogued a variety of instances, both across cultures and through history, where individuals form strong relationships with imaginary figures. These include relationships between readers and fictional protagonists (e.g., characters in a novel); between citizens and major political figures and monarchs; and even between individuals and gods or spirits. Clearly, the status of these figures, and reverence accorded to them, varies enormously; nevertheless, it is argued that the individual requires similar powers of imagination in order to successfully enter into a relationship with the figure.

This section has looked at ways in which PSI can be regarded as an extension of normal social cognition, specifically in terms of the use of the imagination. Drawing on the PSI literature as well, it can be argued that the psychological

processes acting at the individual level parallel those used in ordinary social activity and relationship building.

Developmental Aspects of PSI

In addition to considering how PSI might evolve historically and culturally, it is necessary to consider how it develops across the lifespan. PSI in childhood is a seriously neglected topic in the communication literature, and the influence of media in childhood has received little attention from developmental psychologists, a situation that seems absurd given the sheer quantity of media consumed by young children. Furthermore, media is similarly neglected in much of the adolescence literature. These are fields to which a broader model of PSI might make a very useful contribution.

A number of studies have examined young children's perception of television characters. Reeves and Greenberg (1977) and Reeves and Lometti (1979) used multidimensional scaling to show how children from 7 to 11 years of age evaluate characters on the basis of typical human personality dimensions. Hoffner (1996) was the first researcher to apply the concept of PSI to children's choice of favorite characters. Using an oral modification of the PSI scale with 7- to 12-year-olds, she found that sex-role stereotyping was an important predictive factor, with boys overwhelmingly choosing male characters, whereas girls preferred equivalent numbers of male and female characters. Using semistructured interviews, Giles and Long (1998) collected some qualitative data that suggest that identification is a more important influence on 5- to 6-year-olds' choice of character (particularly for boys), whereas by 10–11 years, children's rationale for selecting characters is influenced more by PSI, with characters being described as similar to friends.

The influence of media figures in adolescence is perhaps less widely studied, although the use of celebrities and other media figures as role models has long been a topic of popular concern (Pleiss & Feldhusen, 1995). There has been particular anxiety over the influence of thin celebrities in adolescent eating disorders (Harrison, 1997; Heilman, 1998). Most studies in this area draw on identification as the key psychological process involved; however, little research has investigated how adolescents develop parasocial relationships with media figures. Cohen's (1999) study of Arab and Jewish teenagers' PSI with characters from an Israeli soap opera suggests that, in adolescence, favorite characters are likely to be related to as pseudofriends rather than figures who are idolized and imitated. Nevertheless, recent research on PSI and talk radio indicates that PSI with a radio host may itself be enough to influence listeners' attitudes and

behavior (A. M. Rubin & Step, 2000). Therefore the psychological processes involved in attitudinal influence and modelling may be highly complex.

Clearly, more research is needed on developmental aspects of PSI and media use in general. However the little data that exist suggest that children begin to use personality traits to evaluate media figures from an early age, and that the characteristics of PSI have begun to appear by early adolescence. But the relative importance of PSI and identification processes is far from clear, and it may be that these processes vary according to different types of media figure.

OTHER THEORETICAL ISSUES

The literature reviewed so far supports the contention that PSI is a topic worthy of closer scrutiny by psychologists, as well as contributing usefully to communication research. In this next section I outline two important considerations that should be central to any future model of PSI. The first concerns the nature of the parasocial relationship itself; how it might be defined in behavioral, cognitive, or discursive terms; the second, closely related to the first, concerns the nature of the media figure and how different types of figure may determine different manifestations of PSI.

Types of User–Figure Relationship

A successful typology of media user–media figure encounter needs to begin by drawing a clear distinction between PSI and identification, as proposed by Rosengren and Windahl (1972). However, identification itself produces different types of user–figure interaction. Feilitzen and Linne (1975) distinguished between similarity identification, where the television viewer identifies with a character because they share certain salient characteristics, and wishful identification, where the viewer desires to emulate the character. Cohen's (1999) description of four discrete types of user–figure relationship encapsulates this distinction and draws in affinity as a discrete category.

PSI. Cohen defined the parasocial relationship as one in which “the viewer is engaged in a role relationship with a television persona” (p. 329). However, it is probably more helpful in this model to regard it as a user response to a figure as if s/he was a personal acquaintance. This response consists of both behavioral responses (e.g., greeting a newscaster out loud), and cognitive responses (e.g., making psychological inferences about a figure's behavior). From a media perspective, this role is dictated to some extent by programming conventions.

For example, as Scannell (1996) described, UK radio broadcasters made a deliberate change during the 1940s from a clipped, formal style to an informal, “fireside” approach, in which the listener was addressed as though a personal acquaintance. It is important to bear in mind, however, that PSI is more than just a media-related phenomenon, as argued earlier in the article; imaginary social relationships are characteristic of most societies through history.

Identification. This category represents Feilitzen and Linne’s (1975) concept of similarity identification, whose key feature is the sharing of perspective. What distinguishes this form of identification from PSI is that for identification a user needs to recognize some salient characteristic in the figure that is shared by themselves. However the user may still engage in PSI without sharing any perspective; this enables us to interact with media figures whom we actively dislike.

Wishful Identification. In this form of identification we desire to emulate the figure with which we identify, either in general terms (e.g., as a role model for future action, or identity development), or in specific terms (e.g., imitating a particular behavior). Again it is important to distinguish this relationship from a parasocial one, particularly in terms of adolescent attachments to media figures (i.e., PSI does not necessarily imply a wish to emulate the figure, as often feared by parents).

Affinity. This covers all instances where a media user displays a liking for a media figure, without identifying with them, or forming a parasocial relationship. Affinity has occasionally been used as a complementary measure to PSI; for example, A. M. Rubin (1981) found a correlation between affinity and the “companionship” aspect of television, and it correlated positively with PSI in the A. M. Rubin et al. (1985) study. Affinity may be most useful in relation to fictional and fantasy characters, where PSI might seem too strong a description.

In addition to Cohen’s four basic types of relationship, we should also consider instances of PSI that result in the user actually meeting the figure, whether in person or “in character,” or perhaps in a remote sense (e.g., via a phone-in show). An important consideration is the moment at which PSI becomes normal social interaction. This “gray area” raises all manner of issues about media experience and the presentation of self by media figures themselves.

Types of Media Figure

One of the main ideas behind Cohen’s typology is that types of user–figure interaction vary with different types of media figure. He argued that PSI is most

appropriate for describing media figures who directly address the viewer, such as newscasters and presenters. Some evidence comes from studies that show that, when a comedian “breaks the fourth wall” and engages the audience directly, higher levels of PSI are reported (Auter, 1992; Auter & Davis, 1991). Cohen also argued that identification is more appropriate for protagonists, such as central characters in a film, and that affinity is a better term to describe relationships with characters in serials (e.g., soap operas).

In some respects, this distinction is constrained by the notion of PSI as momentary activity within a single encounter, rather than to the cultivation of relationships that persist after the encounter. Behavioral aspects of PSI are most likely with forms of direct address by media figures, although strong PSI is also exhibited with soap characters (Perse & A. M. Rubin, 1987) and cartoon characters (Hoffner, 1996), suggesting that direct address is not a prerequisite for PSI. Indeed, when we consider how parasocial relationships might form over time, both types of identification listed earlier might enter into the mix as well. Thus a parasocial relationship may exist with many different types of figure, regardless of the overt interaction between user and figure in any given encounter.

Nevertheless, three important characteristics of different types of media figure can be identified that may determine the nature of the parasocial relationship that can evolve beyond the immediate encounter.

Authenticity/Realism. A key element in the user–figure relationship is the extent to which users are able to make person, or character, judgements about the figure. Therefore, it is necessary for the figure to present a credible persona—one of the essential ingredients for the appreciation of soap opera (Geraghty, 1991). A number of studies have found “perceived realism” to be a significant predictor of PSI (Alperstein, 1991; A. M. Rubin et al., 1985; A. M. Rubin & Perse, 1987). However, this may well depend on the nature of the media figure. Clearly, television personalities such as newscasters, presenters and celebrities need to appear authentic, because this is part of their appeal. A popular celebrity can easily harm his or her reputation by “faking it,” for example, endorsing an inappropriate product (Alperstein, 1991). Perceived realism is also important for PSI with soap characters (A. M. Rubin & Perse, 1987).

Nevertheless, intense parasocial attachments may be formed with figures who are clearly not “authentic,” such as a pop star who takes an obvious pseudonym and is only known through his or her “act,” a fantasy character such as Mickey Mouse, or a cartoon character such as Homer Simpson. What psychological explanations lie behind these types of attachments? Clearly research is necessary

on this topic. For the time being, however, it may be possible to conceive of authenticity as a dimension within the overall model of PSI.

Representation Across Different Media Outlets. One quality of media figures often overlooked in the PSI literature is the continuity of their representation across different media outlets. Newscasters, the genre of figure that inspired the PSI scale research paradigm, are somewhat unusual among media figures in that they rarely appear in media other than in a specific television genre. A pop star or film star, on the other hand, may appear on several different television and radio programs, as performer or chat show guest, give interviews to dozens of magazines, and be the object of discussion by daily newspapers. Furthermore, the repeated viewing of a video cassette featuring the star will intensify visual aspects of PSI with that star. Newscasters, on the other hand, although inviting affective and behavioral responses during the bulletin, are unlikely in most cases to engage media users far beyond the viewing episode.

User Contexts. Another feature of most PSI research is that the media user is typically characterized as a television viewer, often a solitary figure, whose PSI gratifies a need for social interaction. Although findings generally fail to support the notion of PSI as compensation for a lack of social outlets (e.g., A. M. Rubin et al., 1985), the emphasis has been exclusively on individual responses to media figures. What implications does co-viewing have for PSI? If co-viewers reinforce initial responses to a media figure, this may strengthen the parasocial relationship; indeed, co-viewing—and subsequent discussion of the figure—may strongly influence the development of the parasocial relationship.

Future research in PSI needs to address the above issues. The different types of user–figure interaction can be addressed by conceptualizing PSI as an extension of ordinary social interaction, and by examining features of social encounters that are significant for parasocial encounters. The different types of media figure can inform this conceptualization, but in addition, theories of PSI need to distinguish between PSI as momentary activity and longer term interaction—the development of parasocial relationships as conceived by R. B. Rubin and McHugh (1987). These issues are now discussed in relation to the formulation of a model of PSI.

DEVELOPMENT OF A MODEL FOR PSI RESEARCH

In this section a model for future research in the area of PSI is described, drawing on the existing literature and on the issues raised in the previous section.

McQuail and Windahl (1993) have outlined three functions of communication models that this model respects. Firstly, it has an organizing function: It draws together the themes from the literature in an attempt to elucidate the processes in the formation of parasocial relationships; secondly, it has a heuristic function: It presents a theory of PSI as extended social activity in the form of a continuum; and thirdly, it has a predictive function: By outlining the processes in parasocial relationship formation, it anticipates possible outcomes of media use.

The model is conceived as having two basic components. The first is a continuum of social activity based around social encounters. This enables us to identify the nature of an encounter at any point in its duration through assessing four qualities of the encounter, and to determine which qualities define an encounter as parasocial. It also allows us to distinguish between parasocial encounters according to the type of media figures involved, and the nature of the possible relationship between the user and the figure. The second component is a diagrammatic chart outlining the processes involved in a parasocial encounter that may ultimately bind the media user into a parasocial relationship with a figure.

Model Component 1: Continuum of Social–Parasocial Encounters

The first part of the model addresses Horton and Wohl's (1956) call for PSI to be incorporated into "the matrix of usual social activity" (p. 225). It describes four qualities of social encounters that can be used to locate a given encounter on a continuum that stretches from an unambiguous social encounter (a face-to-face dyad) at the top end to a genuinely parasocial encounter at the bottom. The four qualities are (a) number of persons involved (broadly, whether a dyadic encounter or a group encounter); (b) physical distance between interactants (either proximate, i.e. face-to-face, or distant, i.e., separated by an amount of space that renders face-to-face communication impossible); (c) social conventions (whether formal or informal; this distinction is based on ritual features of the interaction as well as power relations); (d) potential relationship between the interactants (in most face-to-face communication this is unlimited, but will differ across levels of PSI).

At the "social" end of the continuum, encounters are ranked largely in terms of group size, from dyads to large groups. The rationale here is that, the more other people are involved in that encounter, the weaker the quality of interaction with a specific person becomes. Up to this point, the encounters have not been defined according to the individual characteristics of the persons involved. Midway along the continuum, however, the emphasis switches from ordinary social groups to encounters with media figures. The most "social" of these

encounters is a one-to-one meeting with a media figure, in which the relationship possibilities are potentially the same as with any social encounter, albeit restrained by social conventions.

As we approach the “parasocial” end of the continuum, the interaction becomes weaker according to the authenticity or realism of the representation of the person. For parasocial encounters, distance and formality become redundant qualities of the interaction; all PSI inevitably takes place across a distance and is entirely constrained by the social (or communicative) conventions. Therefore parasocial encounters are distinguished according to the nature of the media figure, and by the relationship that is possible with that figure (determined by the figure’s authenticity/realism). These can be broadly identified across three levels of PSI.

First-order PSI refers to the type of encounter defined by Cohen (1999) as parasocial, where the media figure addresses the user directly, for example a talk show host facing the camera and greeting the viewer.

Second-order PSI concerns encounters where the media figure is to some degree inauthentic. Typical of this level is a soap character portrayed by an actor. Here there is no doubt as to the fictional nature of the representation, yet the character’s physical counterpart is responded to as a real person. Ultimately, a user might make face-to-face contact with the figure, but would only be able to enter into a social relationship with the actor and not the character to whom s/he has established a parasocial relationship. Thus user–figure meetings may be problematic; for example, there are numerous anecdotes concerning soap actors who play unpopular roles receiving abuse from viewers based on their character’s behavior.

Third-order PSI concerns encounters with fantasy or cartoon figures who have no real-life counterpart. These are distinguished from first- and second-order encounters in that a social relationship with the figure is impossible.

This continuum is outlined in Table 1, along with examples at each level. These examples are not intended to be definitive by any means but simply illustrate the principles involved (as it stands they are mostly culture specific). In the “potential relationship” column, the examples are intended to refer to interaction with a single person in each setting. So, for “party,” the potential relationship is defined by the probabilities at the outset; for example, you walk into the party and see a stranger who, over the course of the evening, could develop into a friend. The potential relationships set up by this informal large group setting are significantly different from those in a third-order PSI (where friendship is impossible) and other encounters progressively down the continuum (where friendship is an increasingly remote prospect).

TABLE 1
Continuum of Social-Parasocial Interaction

Encounter	Location	Constraints		Potential relationship	
		Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal
Dyadic	Proximate Distant	Interview e-mail message	SOCIAL Conversation e-mail message	Work colleague Future associate	Close friend Cyberfriend
Small Group	Proximate	Working group	Friendship group	Colleague	Friend (within group?)
Large Group	Proximate Distant*	Board meeting Lecture (re. lecturer)	Party Lecture (re. fellow student)	Future colleague Semi-parasocial	Future friend Future friend/ colleague
Encounter with Media Figure	Proximate Distant	Fan club convention Phone-in show	Chance meeting "Personal" letter	Dyadic, but role bound Dyadic, but role bound	As normal dyad? Semi-parasocial
First-order PSI	Distant	News broadcast	-	Parasocial, but chance of contact	-
Second-order PSI	Distant	Soap character	-	Parasocial, can only make contact at representative level (i.e., with actor)	-
Third-order PSI	Distant	Cartoon figure	-	Purely parasocial, no chance of contact	-
PARASOCIAL					

Note. *Without formally distinguishing distant from proximate, this may seem a strange example, but I have included audience membership as a distant experience—you breathe the same air as the lecturer but, for various reasons, you may never "meet" him or her.

Clearly there is plenty of potential slippage between levels, although this is most likely across levels of formality and informality at the “social” end of the continuum (a colleague has every chance of becoming a best friend, but this is not true of all formal dyadic relationships). The further toward the “parasocial” end one goes, the less likelihood there is of formal relations evolving into informal relations. Thus formality is one of the essentially binding features of PSI.

This component of the model, then, addresses some of the features of PSI that have hitherto been overlooked in the literature: varying degrees of PSI based on the varying nature of media figures. Perhaps most importantly, it considers the possibilities for social contact with media figures. These may play an important role in determining the nature of the parasocial relationship, particularly in the case of fans of specific individuals, and in extreme cases where individuals have contacted celebrities in a threatening manner or even been accused of stalking celebrities (Dietz et al., 1991; Giles, 2000).

Model Component 2: Stages in the Development of the Parasocial Relationship

The second component of the model is aimed at identifying the processes through which an encounter with a media figure may evolve into a parasocial relationship. It draws on the continuum presented earlier in that the nature of the parasocial relationship is determined partly by the nature of the media figure. It also considers the effects of successive encounters both within the same medium (e.g., successive episodes of a drama serial) and across several media (e.g., a celebrity appearing on different television shows, radio broadcasts, advertisements, and in magazines). It also considers the function of other people, particularly covievers of television, in shaping the outcome of PSI.

Figure 1 contains a flowchart that displays the behavioral outcomes of a single viewing episode (or any single episode of interaction with a media figure). The cognitive activity during the episode is contained in the oval at the top of the chart, and consists mainly of making judgements about the media figure (person) based on knowledge of that person. For example, physical knowledge may give rise to physical attraction, or the expression of an opinion may chime with the opinion of the user and create a positive judgment based on attitude homophily.

Within the viewing episode, a number of outcomes are likely, and these are based largely on Cohen’s (1999) types of relationship. The user may express affinity for the figure, for example, liking a character in a drama, but the interaction goes no further than the viewing episode. Alternatively, he or she may identify with the figure. If this is the case, then it is possible that the user’s

behavior beyond the viewing episode may be influenced by the encounter, in the shape of imitative behavior or modelling. This path is identified in the flowchart by a box and one-way arrow. Future encounters with the figure may also reinforce (or disrupt) the imitative behavior.

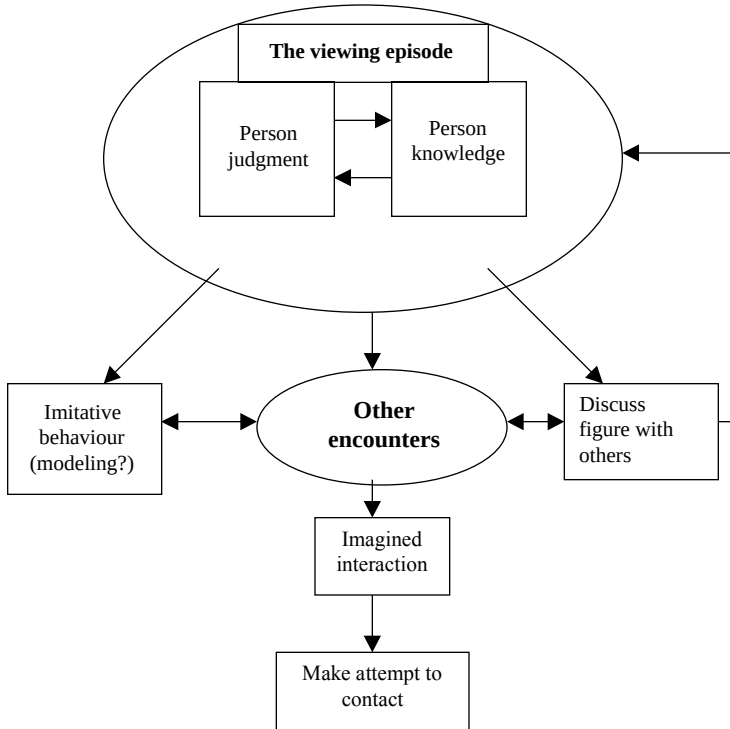


Figure 1. Stages in the development of a parasocial relationship.

Where PSI takes place, the development of a relationship can only occur if there are further media encounters, so this connection is marked by a one-way arrow. An important link in the model is the role of other media users, who can influence the PSI process in two ways; firstly, they can affect the relationship development in the light of other encounters (for example, by revealing some gossip about a celebrity from a different source). This is particularly true where the opinions of other users do not agree with those of the individual user, for example a user's friends disapprove of a particular soap character of whom the user had initially formed a positive opinion. If the user is highly influenced by peers, the discussion may substantially color the person judgments made in the next viewing episode. The second way that other users may influence PSI occurs

during the viewing episode itself, which is why the arrow for this connection is bi-directional. Person judgements may be continually updated during the viewing episode in the light of comments of other viewers.

The behavioral outcome of PSI is dependent on a number of encounters with the media figure. At some point the user may consider whether or not to make contact with the figure. Where this is the case, a period of imagined interaction may intervene, because the user will need to weigh the costs and benefits of making such an approach. Most of the time PSI fails to reach this stage, but simply forms part of the user's cultural and social life.

In summary, this model of PSI goes well beyond the conceptualization of PSI presented in the literature to date. It presents PSI as an extension of normal social activity by considering shared and different qualities of social and parasocial encounters. It considers psychological and other issues that have not been addressed in the PSI literature: the distinction between PSI as momentary activity and the longer term development of parasocial relationships; the importance of different types of media figure, and different types of medium, on the development of such relationships; the role of co-viewers and discussants in shaping PSI; and the dual function of PSI and identification.

APPLICATIONS OF THE MODEL

The most important reason for devising this model of PSI is to provide a theoretical framework that might inform future research on aspects of PSI that are underdeveloped in the existing literature.

In relation to the psychometric research of the uses and gratifications tradition, the model expands the notion of PSI as a behavior that might vary in nature with regard to different types of media figure. An initial test of the model would be to compare PSI with, say, newsreaders, soap characters, and cartoon characters, perhaps by entering values for all three types as predictors in models of different aspects of media use. It may also be that parasocial relationships at different levels develop along different lines; here, R. B. Rubin and McHugh's (1987) model of parasocial relationship development could be examined across different types of media figure.

Other aspects of the model require different methodologies to those that have been used to study PSI thus far. For example, the influence of coviewing on PSI, and the subsequent integration of information in the progress of a parasocial relationship might require longitudinal designs, or even ethnographic research, particularly as a means of examining the meaning of parasocial relationships for media users. In this respect, it will be necessary to apply qualitative methodologies

to the study of PSI in order to gain a richer understanding of the psychological implications of PSI.

Perhaps the most important area for future PSI research lies in the developmental psychology field. Firstly, the creation of adolescent heroes and role models is a concern for many parents and professionals working with young people. Much of the existing research in this area draws on social learning theory in suggesting that media figures function largely as “models” that are imitated by impressionable youngsters (e.g., Austin & Meili, 1994; Harrison, 1997). However, the literature on PSI suggests that media users develop parasocial relationships with media figures that are more complex than modelling theory, based largely on the concept of identification.

The two components of the model might inform future research on this topic. Firstly, the continuum, with its consideration of different types of relationships determined by different types of media figure, offers an explanatory framework that might be used to explore the nature of attachments to a variety of media figures. Secondly, the model might be used to chart the evolution of a parasocial relationship in adolescence, to investigate how successive exposures to a media figure bind the user into a relationship, and, significantly, the contribution of other users (both co-viewers and discussants) in shaping the course of the relationship. The conceptual distinction—made in the model—between PSI and identification will be a critical factor in further research in adolescent media use.

An important application of PSI research is in the clinical field, where interesting research has recently been conducted into “special media interests” with a population of learning disabled adults (Whomsley, 2000). Media figures were found to have considerable influence over the lives of the participants in this study, with favorite characters acting as models for planned behavior in social situations, or providing a cathartic or escapist function. The effects of special media interests included both positive and negative features; again the model might provide a clear theoretical framework for investigating the processes involved in the development of parasocial relationships.

A second clinical application of the model might be in the area of physical disability, exploring the value and functions of PSI in the lives of people with restricted mobility. This would include older adults, who formed the basis of much early PSI research examining the association between PSI and social isolation. Here, the ideas underpinning the continuum might provide a useful theoretical base for research. Television producers and program makers might also have particular interest in the factors promoting strong PSI in these populations.

Inevitably, in some cases the effects of PSI are psychopathological in nature. Failure to discriminate between PSI and ordinary social activity may lead to

situations where individuals believe that their PSI has been reciprocated by the media figure. A classic example of this is the case of John Hinckley Jr., who shot former U. S. president Ronald Reagan in an attempt to demonstrate his strength of feeling for actress Jodie Foster (Giles, 2000). Like many aspects of PSI, this phenomenon, known as erotomania in the clinical literature, has a history that dates back long before mass communication. Today, we are likely to associate such behavior with stalking, a matter of deep concern for celebrities and other media figures. Perhaps a final application of the model would be to identify the points of departure between ordinary fandom and delusional behavior, and at what point in the development of the parasocial relationship such points become salient.

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