

Parasocial relationships:

Levels of Parasocial Relationships, the Absorption Addiction Model and the Attachment Theory explanation

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are non-reciprocal socio-emotional connections with media figures such as celebrities or influencers.

Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships, where one person extends emotional energy, interest and time, and the other party, is completely unaware of their existence. Parasocial relationships are most common with celebrities, television/ film stars or sports personalities.

Horton and Wohl (1956) define parasocial relationships as attachments in which the 'fan' knows all about the celebrity, but the celebrity does not know that they exist. In some cases, the subject of a parasocial relationship is a brand, team or fictional character.

In the past, parasocial relationships occurred predominantly with tv/ film personalities. Now, these relationships also occur between individuals and their favourite bloggers, social media users, and gamers. The nature and intimacy of parasocial relationships have also matured. Reality television allows viewers to share in the most intimate and personal lives of tv personalities, and celebrities openly share their opinions and activities through various social media outlets such as Instagram, Facebook and TikTok.

Additionally, the Internet allows for 24-hour access to media users, and increased internet dependency may lead to increased parasocial interactions. While parasocial relationships still remain one-sided, they have transformed into more interactive environments, allowing individuals to communicate with their media personalities, and increasing the intimacy and strength of the parasocial relationship.

Levels of Parasocial Relationships

McCutcheon et al (2002) developed the celebrity attitude scale (CAS). The CAS is a 23-item scale in which respondents first identify their favourite celebrity and rates how strongly they feel about the celebrity on a 7-point scale. They then indicate the celebrity's area (e.g., acting, sports, religion) and rate the 23 items (e.g., If I were to meet my favourite celebrity in person, he/ she would already somehow know that I am his/ her biggest fan, I share with my favourite celebrity a special bond that cannot be described in words).

The CAS was used in a study by Maltby et al (2006) who offered a description of the different levels in a parasocial relationships demonstrating how they increase in strength and intensity.

Entertainment- social

This is the least intense level, where celebrities are viewed as sources of entertainment and fuel for social interaction. They may be the focus of discussion between friends or be poster-ad favourites.

Intense- personal

This is an intermediate level, which reflects a greater level of involvement and interaction from a parasocial perspective with a celebrity. A 'fan' may have frequent obsessive thoughts and intense feelings about their celebrity crush. They may be delusional and believe they are in a mutual relationship with their celebrity.

Borderline- pathological

This is the strongest level, which features uncontrollable fantasies and extreme behaviours. This can involve spending time or money seeking the celebrity out or planning ways to access the fantasies from their parasocial obsession. This can result in stalking behaviour.

The Absorption Addiction Model

McCutcheon et al (2002) linked the levels of parasocial relationships to the deficiencies people have in their own lives. For example, an individual with low self-esteem may lack fulfilment in their everyday relationships. Someone who initially has an entertainment-social orientation to a certain celebrity may be triggered into more intense involvement by some personal crisis or stressful life event. The parasocial relationship may allow them to 'escape from reality'. However, they may not be aware of the true extent of their behaviour.

The Absorption Addiction model has two components;

- i) **Absorption** - Seeking fulfilment in celebrity worship motivates an individual to focus their attention as far as possible on the celebrity, becoming preoccupied with them.
- ii) **Addiction** - just as with physiological addiction to a psychoactive substance, the individual needs to increase their 'dose' in order to gain satisfaction. This may lead to more extreme behaviours and delusional thinking.

Attachment Theory Explanation

Some psychologists have suggested that parasocial relationships are created as a result of attachment difficulties in early childhood. This is the emotional bond formed between two people, usually a child and its mother. As Bowlby (1944) suggested, early maternal deprivation or a break in the attachment bond during the critical period, can lead to emotional difficulties later in life.

Ainsworth (1971) went on to develop the different types of attachment which are formed in early childhood. In parasocial relationships, these focus on insecure attachment types; insecure-resistant and insecure-avoidant.

Insecure-resistant attachment types in childhood are characterised by high anxiety, low willingness to explore surroundings, and a confusing mix of seeking and rejecting comfort from a caregiver. In adulthood this is seen as clingy or needy behaviour. Insecure-resistant types are most likely to form parasocial relationships as adults. This is because they seek to have unfulfilled needs met, in a relationship that is not going to offer them the threat of rejection, breakup or disappointment. Insecure-avoidant types, on the other hand prefer to avoid the pain and rejection of relationships altogether, whether they be social or parasocial.

This is a psychodynamic explanation which argues that the tendency to form parasocial relationships originates in the early childhood relationships between the child and its primary caregiver. This theory states but those with insecure attachments are more likely to become strongly attached to celebrities.

Dinkha et al (2015) suggested that parasocial relationships are independent of cultural influence. They compared two contrasting cultures; a collectivist (Kuwait) an individualistic (USA). They found that people with an insecure attachment type were the most likely to form intense parasocial relationships with TV personalities, and that this was true in both types of culture. This provides support for the view the attachment type maybe a universal explanation for the need to form parasocial relationships.

