

2023

## You Don't Know Me, but I Love You: Parasocial Relationships and Their Impacts

Joy Weru  
*Kennesaw State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/emergingwriters>



Part of the [Social Psychology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Weru, Joy (2023) "You Don't Know Me, but I Love You: Parasocial Relationships and Their Impacts," *Emerging Writers*: Vol. 6, Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/emergingwriters/vol6/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Emerging Writers by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu).

## You Don't Know Me, but I Love You: Parasocial Relationships and Their Impacts

by Joy Weru

### *Context*

From numerical melodies to High School Musical songs, and from platforms like Facebook and MySpace to TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, today's younger generations have grown up with a plethora of technology and social media. Like numerous things in life, there is a good and a bad side to this constant consumption of social media. Social media offers — and continues to offer — a space for people to connect with their friends and loved ones when distance tries to pull them apart, but it can also drive a wedge between people online and in real life. According to Kimberly Panganiban, a licensed marriage and family therapist, “Although social media has many positive benefits...some of the negative effects of social media and relationships include decreased time with a partner, missed connections, jealousy, conflict arising from disagreements or hurt feelings, and negative comparisons” (par 4). With the abundance of vacation photos and friend group outings that are posted online, social media has also become a place where loneliness and dissatisfaction with oneself have become normalized.

According to a recent study by Harvard University, there has been an increase in loneliness rates with “36% of all Americans—including 61% of young adults and 51% of mothers with young children—feel[ing] serious loneliness” (Weissbourd par 1). They also found that young adults in particular “suffer high rates of” loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Weissbourd par 4). The study concludes that today's society does “little to support emerging adults at precisely the time when they are dealing with the most defining, stressful decisions of their lives related to work, love, and identity” (Weissbourd par 7). Despite the negative impacts

social media can impose on relationships with others and with oneself, social media still allows users to meet new people who have similar interests to them. These shared interests create a space where users can find and engage in a community and comfortably explore their interests through other people. This ultimately influences the audience's identity, but what happens when we build an attachment to these influencers in a similar way we attach to our friends?

In Linh Nguyen's TED Talk, she states that 'parasocial' relationships are psychological bonds "where a viewer develops a relationship with a media personality" in which they feel like they are "friends or closer despite having limited interaction" (2:12-2:28). These relationships tend to invoke numerous positive and negative effects. Parasocial relationships have been found to impact an influencer's credibility, by mimicking two-way familial, platonic, and sometimes even romantic relationships to build trust between them and their audience, thus gauging how marketable they are while fulfilling the audiences' belongingness needs. These mediated relationships provide a safe space where audience members can be creative and more confident in themselves; swing the pendulum too far, and the mediated figure becomes a source of escapism rather than enjoyment. But how does it begin?

### ***Findings***

#### *How Do Parasocial Relationships Form?*

Most research on parasocial relationships tends to focus solely on the audience's contributions to it, but according to a study by Julius Mathew Riles, an associate professor at the University of Missouri with a specialty in media psychology, et al, mediated figures play a crucial role in building parasocial perceptions (316). Parasocial perceptions are the way the audience believes the media figure thinks of them. These perceptions are usually induced by the levels of engagement and means of communication from the influencer. Vilma Luoma-aho, a professor of corporate communication at Jyväskylä University School of Business & Economics,

acknowledges the role the mediated figure plays in creating a parasocial bond with fans. She states that social media influencers build connections with their audience by “addressing them directly and using a conversational style” (228). Some mediated figures will refer to their audience as ‘friends,’ or even ‘best friends,’ while telling their audience that they love them because although audience participation is important in brand “endorsement effectiveness, ...audience engagement alone isn't enough” (Luoma-aho 228). A relationship with a sense of understanding is needed.

The ‘we understand each other’ tactic is especially productive on young adults who suffer from loneliness and self-esteem issues, which, as Nguyen describes, is an “unfortunate” hallmark of adolescence (4:00-4:04). Nguyen— as a K-pop fan herself— falls victim to this tactic, confessing that although she knows what is happening, she “can't help it” because when she watches them, she feels “happier...like [she's] friends with them” and knows them (0:40-0:52). Like Nguyen, fans' seemingly uncontrollable desire to consume content from their favorite media figure is not unnatural. Luke A. MacNeill, a researcher affiliated with the University of New Brunswick in Saint John, and Enrico DiTommaso, a professor in the Department of Psychology at the same university, through their study, found that “people who identify with anxious attachment [styles] are drawn to media figures who are warm and sensitive” (2). When someone is suffering through loneliness, low self-esteem, depression, or anxiety, they tend to gravitate towards people they feel comfortable sharing their feelings with. With the increasing rates of loneliness and the fear of “social rejection that might take place” in real life relationships, fans usually lean towards parasocial relationships with their favorite media figure to fill in the emptiness and ease the storm of confusion within them (Nguyen 3:38-3:53). The cycle of fan engagement, or parasocial investments, and the mediated figures affectionate response that stimulate parasocial perception is what builds parasocial relationships, but according to Riles' results, parasocial investments

by the audience are stronger (316). These investments evolve from infrequent to constant media consumption, but what are the results of this change; although this evolution may seem negative, could there be positive impacts?

*What Are the Negative Impacts of Parasocial Relationships?*

Because parasocial relationships mimic real-life relationships, it is quite easy to not only become attached to them but also become addicted to them. During Veronica Espinal's interview with Kai H., a graduate student with a focus on Asian Studies and Media, they discuss parasocial relationships within the K-pop industry. They conclude that when parasocial relationships are taken too far, the parasocial relationship starts to develop "into an intense attachment built upon the emotional dependency of the fan towards the idol" (Espinal par 11). The companies these artists work under fully understand this. These companies enable parasocial relationships between the fans and their artists because they "capitalize heavily on" said relationship (Espinal par 6). Luoma-aho acknowledges the commodification of parasocial relationships by noting that audience engagement alone "does not ... advance the credibility of the endorser ... a relationship (even a parasocial one) ... is essential" to make profit (281). By manufacturing their idols, entertainment companies "have established a sense of loyalty in fans to further grow their fanbase, while ensuring engagement" (Espinal par 6). However, 'quality' people are not all that is offered by the companies to ensure the strength of parasocial relationships.

Companies also offer "the continuous outpour of idol content," such as variety shows and numerous albums in a year, and use apps like BUBBLE, an app where fans can have a "1-on-1" text-like conversation with their idols, as building blocks for parasocial relationships (Espinal par 6). It is this constant flow of content that refuses the audience "a chance to step away from the fandom life" (Espinal par 12). Kai continues stating how without rest from the fandom life, idols

can very easily become “a source of escapism from their [the fans] real lives” (Espinal par 11). Escapism in small quantities is a tool that everyone uses to destress and turn their minds off, but when escapism becomes a frequently used vehicle people start to lose themselves, and the fantasy world they built in their head starts to take over their reality.

This need for escapism could be closely tied to the fan's belongingness needs. According to MacNeill and DiTommaso, “one's attachment needs are satisfied by specific and irreplaceable attachment figures,” especially when in distress (2). The “need to belong is a more general desire for acceptance and belonging that can be fulfilled by a variety of social contacts, including (but not limited to) attachment figures” (MacNeill and DiTommaso 2). They continue to explain that people with anxious attachment styles “do not have people in their real lives that satisfy their belongingness needs” (MacNeill and DiTommaso 2). Kai's escapism point relates to MacNeill and DiTommaso's findings because when a fan uses escapism to neglect their reality, their relationships tend to suffer the most. This results in unfulfilling relationships and leads them back to the parasocial bonds they have built with their mediated figures; it is a cycle. Unmet belongingness needs leads to the mediated member moving from a source of entertainment to a source of escapism, which could later develop into an addiction to escapism. Most companies do not manage the problem effectively because these parasocial relationships provide profit, but when belongingness needs are met with a healthy dose of parasocial relation, the positive effects of parasocial relationships will outweigh the negative ones.

#### *What Are the Positive Impacts of Parasocial Relationships?*

Social media, when used in moderation and with intention, is a great tool for satisfying needs that are not met in real life. These needs include communication, relationships, self-

exploration, and a sense of belonging. According MacNeill and DiTommaso, “media figures can satisfy a person’s belongingness needs” through parasocial relationships (2). In their study’s abstract, they also referenced another study by Derrick et al. that discovered that a fan simply thinking about their favorite media figure brings forth a sense of belonging “when belongingness needs are threatened” (MacNeill and DiTommaso 2). For numerous people, identity and self-exploration are crucial steppingstones to cross over. These feelings of self-accomplishment are exacerbated for young adults who feel they must have their whole life and identity figured out before they are even halfway through their young adult years. To add on to the feeling of self-dissatisfaction, there are multiple young adults— and even teenagers— who flex their assets and careers online. When a fans’ favorite media figure goes on a ‘live’ and gives words of encouragement, these feelings of dissatisfaction seem to fade into an abyss where nothing except the fans’ happiness and comfort in themselves matters.

Ayuni Nur and Pazil Nur were also curious about how parasocial relationships, identity, social identity, and participatory culture play a role in the well-being of K-pop fans. After interviewing a few fans waiting outside of a venue for a K-pop concert, they found that a lot of the fans that were interviewed felt like they not only started to accept themselves, but they also became more open minded, more creative, and more comfortable being creative. In an interview by Patricia Donovan with Shira Gabriel, who is an associate professor of psychology at the University at Buffalo, Gabriel discuss the impacts parasocial relationships have on people based on their self-esteem levels. In a study performed by Gabriel, she found “that people with low self-esteem saw their favorite celebrities as very similar to their ideal selves, while those with high self-esteem saw them as similar to their actual selves” (Donovan par 6). Gabriel continues that

“for low self-esteem subjects these benefits were unique to parasocial relationships” (Donovan par 7). When simply writing about their favorite same-sex celebrities’ qualities, “subjects with low self-esteem said they felt closer to their ideal selves and experienced [a] boost in [their] self-esteem” (Donovan par 8). Nur’s and Gabriel’s results depict how although heavy participation by the audience can warrant numerous negative effects, parasocial relationships can be positive for people personally, mentally, emotionally, and socially. Parasocial relationships, in healthy quantities, allow fans a safe space to not only conversate with someone they adore, but also with other people who understand them, and in turn they understand. This mutual understanding nullifies the fear of rejection and builds the foundation of fan communities. Thus, parasocial relationships bridge similarities between the audience and their mediated figures, positively impacting the fans’ own self-perception.

### *Discussion*

When I first started conducting research, I was more focused on exploring what parasocial relationships were and identifying its negative impacts, not yet considering that parasocial relationships could have positive impacts. I first encountered the term parasocial relationships on my K-pop abundant ‘For You Page’ on TikTok. After doing more research on it, I realized that I have quite a few parasocial relationships of my own. It was quite interesting to read these articles and discover similarities between their results and the way I encounter and interact with my favorite mediated figures, but the most interesting thing I discovered in my topic was the connection parasocial relationships have with mental health and real-life relationship satisfaction. With the rising rates of anxiety, depression, and loneliness, it seems like the rate and intensity of parasocial relationships is also increasing. I started to think about how famous figures were mostly perceived negatively and overlooked by the public during the 19th and 20th centuries



compared to how famous people today are viewed and consumed; what that might suggest about our, as a collective society, mental well-being, and satisfactory rates of our real- life relationships. The bulk of the articles I found while doing my research were geared toward the audience and not the mediated figure. During future research, I would like to explore more explicitly about how parasocial relationships affect mediated figures (especially with the number of top celebrities discussing how lonely it is at the top). I believe that with the increasing awareness of both mental health and social media addiction, researchers will conduct more studies, experiments, and observations on parasocial relationships and its impacts.

## Bibliography

Donovan, Patricia. "Study Finds If Your Self Esteem Is Low, a Faux Relationship Can Give You a Boost." University of Buffalo, 10 Sept. 2008, [www.buffalo.edu/news/releases/2008/09/9626.html](http://www.buffalo.edu/news/releases/2008/09/9626.html). Accessed 4 Nov. 2022.

Espinal, Veronica. "Parasocial Relationships in K-pop: Emotional Support Capitalism." EnVi Media, 21 Feb. 2021, [www.envimedia.co/parasocial-relationships-k-pop/](http://www.envimedia.co/parasocial-relationships-k-pop/). Accessed 17 Sept. 2022.

Luoma-aho, Vilma, Maity Devdeep, et al. "'You really are a great big sister' – parasocial relationships, credibility, and the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing." *Journal of Marketing Management*, vol. 36, no. 3/4, 2020, pp. 279-298.

MacNeill, A. Luke and Enrico DiTommaso. "Belongingness needs mediate the link between attachment anxiety and parasocial relationship strength." *Psychology of Popular Media*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2023, pp. 242-247.

Nur, Ayuni Mohd Jenol and Hafeeza Ahmad Pazil Nur. "Escapism and motivation: Understanding K-pop fans well-being and identity." *Malaysian Journal of Society and Space*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2020, pp. 336-347.

Nguyen, Linh. "Parasocial Relationships." *YouTube*, uploaded by TEDx Talks, 8 March 2021, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=TL6IKE97u00&t=38s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TL6IKE97u00&t=38s). Accessed 18 Oct. 2022.

Panganiban, Kimberly. "Social Media & Relationships." *Choosing Therapy*, 23 Sept. 2022, [www.choosingtherapy.com/social-media-relationships](http://www.choosingtherapy.com/social-media-relationships). Accessed 18 Oct. 2022.

Riles, Julius Mathew, et al. "Artists and Attributions: How Music Platform Implementation Affects Parasocial Experiences and Support Intentions." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2022, pp. 300-319.

Weissbourd, Richard, et al. "Loneliness in America: How the Pandemic Has Deepened an Epidemic of Loneliness and What We Can Do About It." Harvard Graduate School of Education, Feb. 2021, [www.mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/loneliness-in-america](http://www.mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/loneliness-in-america). Accessed 18 Oct. 2022.