

Exploring The Mental Health Implications Of Parasocial Interaction With Media Characters On Youth



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Abstract

There has been a significant increase in the consumption of media content, including films and television shows in India. This has been amplified by the proliferation of digital streaming platforms. Such a surge in content consumption has profound implications for the development of parasocial relationships and psycho-social aspects of media consumers. The existing study on parasocial interaction suggests that they have the potential to satisfy the social needs of companionship but it is of relevance to look into media characters that facilitate these relationships and their effect on the mental well-being of the individuals. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing a nuanced perspective on the role of media in contemporary society and its impact on social connections. This study by employing a mixed-method research approach sheds light on how these one-sided relationships with media personas influence viewers' emotional well-being and provide insights into the complex interplay of media consumption.

Keywords: Media Characters, Parasocial Interaction, Mental Wellbeing, Social Connections

INTRODUCTION

The study on parasocial relationships began with Horton and Wohl in 1956 looking into a sense of perceived intimacy with media characters. The characteristic features of parasocial relationships like unidirectional connection, perceived intimacy, one sided knowledge, and more have been manifested in various instances at different points of time. The media characters, be it in the form of fictional characters on television, films, in the form of news anchors, or influencers across different social media platforms have played a significant role in shaping the perceptions of media audiences.

Instances of parasocial relationships can be found in British Press coined 'Beatlemania' where the fans of the popular music band "The Beatles", were known to be invested in the personal lives of the band members beyond an acceptable extent. 'Keeping up with the Kardashians' took the characteristic functions of regular exposure and one-sided knowledge in parasocial relationships to the screens. Meanwhile, closer home in India, Ramanand Sagar's 'Ramayan' from 1987 witnessed the characteristics of affective response and perceived intimacy with respect to Arun Govil playing the character of 'Ram'.

After his memorable performance as Lord Ram, actor Arun Govil received throngs of audiences addressing him as 'Bhagwan' and queuing up to receive his blessings. Moreover, the actor could not find work beyond mythological characters because of the audience's perception of him as the character he

played. Similarly, Gia Manek, the actress starring in the show, 'Saath Nibhana Saathiya' a popular television serial, talking about her experience to be perceived similar to the character she plays as 'Gopi Bahu' beyond her on-screen presence in an interview with Brut is yet another example of parasocial relationship manifestations.

Studies like Twenge, et al. (2018) and Meier, et al. (2021) have established the existence of correlation between mental wellbeing and the consumption of new media with both positive as well as negative impacts on media audiences and users. The impact of media consumption on mental wellbeing could be assessed in the development of parasocial relationships. With a perceived sense of intimacy, parasocial relationships are establishing one-sided connections between media characters and media audiences.

Owing to the ease in access of Over The Top content, the current space of internet consumption witnesses activities like consumption of film and media content rising in popularity. According to "Digital 2024: India" report, 79% of internet users between the age group of 16 to 64 years of age consumed streaming and on-demand TV. While according to "Internet in India 2023" report, among 821 million active users of internet in India, 86% of users consume OTT platform across rural and urban audience, making OTT consumption the top activity on the internet with activities like communication and social media falling next in line, having 76% and 70% of users

access them respectively. Therefore, tapping into the unexplored horizon of parasocial relationships with media characters in the domain of highly consumed media content, an understanding on the characters and the impact of their consumption on the psychosocial aspect of the consumers could significantly add to exploring the potentials of the medium to drive change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Experience and Development of Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships play a huge role in determining the audiences' response towards various media content as well as their media consumption. The study on Parasocial Interaction Theory (1956) by Horton and Wohl defined the occurrence of parasocial relationships as the establishment of a one-sided and non-reciprocated connection with media characters with elements like companionship, identifying with the character, friendliness, etc. While parasocial interactions occur during the consumption of media content, the idea of parasocial relationships dives deeper into the motivation of such occurrences. Although parasocial interactions differ from the idea of parasocial relationships according to Dibble, J. L., Hartmann, T., & Rosaen, S. F. (2016), the potential of developing a connection with media characters helps this study in its attempt to understand the formation of such connections.

Katz, E., Blumler, J.G., & Gurevitch, M. (1973) and their study on Uses and Gratifications Theory explains the idea of active goal setting and making decisions for the purpose of media consumption. Seeking to explain media audiences as active decision makers when it comes to media consumption with awareness regarding their motivation to consume the media content, the theory could help. The understanding of the phenomenon helps the study look into the motivation behind the formation of parasocial relationships with media characters.

However, the study also tries to look into the impact of parasocial relationships on the mental wellbeing of the media audience where the research by T., Phillip, Madison, Lance, Porter, Al, Greule. (2016) on Parasocial Compensation Hypothesis and the idea of compensation for real life interaction in parasocial relationships paves way for further understanding on the subject. By putting light on the aspect of media consumption that goes beyond mere exposure to media could help the study on impact of parasocial relationships on the social aspects as well as on the mental wellbeing of the media audience.

In 1956, Horton and Wohl's research on Parasocial Interaction (PSI) revealed that exposure to on-screen media personalities led to development of one-sided connections in individuals similar to that of interpersonal relationships. It identified perceived

similarity, attractiveness, duration of exposure, and frequency of exposure as factors in the formation of parasocial relationships.

Mark Levy, (1979) looked into consumer preferences with respect to traits perceived like attractiveness, likability, and credibility along with exposure and familiarity in the occurrence of PSI and his work determined that the establishment of parasocial relationships could serve to be a functional alternative to real life interactions.

R. B. Rubin and McHugh (1987) found that attraction in terms of social attraction was a comparatively more important factor over physical attractions in the process of development of parasocial relationships and the length of exposure towards a character did not impact the development of parasocial relationships as significantly.

Impact of Parasocial Relationship

Baek, Y. M., Bae, Y., & Jang, H. (2013) highlight from their study that parasocial relationships are negatively related to interpersonal distrust and positively related with loneliness whereas social relationships have a negative correlation with loneliness and positive correlation with trust.

T., Phillip, Madison, Lance, Porter, Al, Greule. (2016) explore the compensation of real life relationships and interactions with the use of parasocial relationships. This study sought to understand the shift towards watching television as opposed to taking part in socialising activities and acknowledged the normalisation of parasocial compensation in America.

Rebecca, (Riva), Tukachinsky, Forster, J, M, Journeay. (2023) studied the impact of parasocial relationships in positive aspects or benefits like experiences similar to that of having real-life relationships, negative aspects like feelings and experiences of grief and loss, and the aspect that has potential to influence behaviour change and support policies for social causes.

Jennings (2023) explored parasocial relationships formed by children in media audiences, seeking to understand the socio-emotional impact of parasocial relationships on children. Experiments revealed that the parasocial relationships could be leveraged to positively contribute to the academic growth of children.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study seeks to understand the factors that lead to formation of parasocial relationships and if there is a certain set of qualities that can be attributed to a media character for the development of parasocial relationships. Also, it attempts to comprehend the impact of parasocial relationships on the mental wellbeing of media audience.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a mixed methods approach combining both a qualitative as well as a quantitative understanding of the subject using in-depth interview and a survey questionnaire for the purpose of data collection. Using purposive sampling and focusing on the age group from 18 years to 26 years of age, in-depth interview was conducted with 25 respondents while the questionnaire was administered to 200 respondents from Bhubaneswar, capital city of Odisha in India. The detailed interview was used to gain a comprehensive understanding of the respondents' media consumption and their reliance on parasocial relationships, liked media characters, impact on their mental wellbeing and social interactions. The questionnaire sought to find insights on the relationship between media characters and media audiences.

FINDINGS

Analysis of the Detailed Interviews

Understanding the extent of media dependency
Most of the respondents stated they consumed motion pictures very-frequently and the responses affirmed that there exists a strong reliance on media platforms for the consumption of motion pictures like film and television, now, web shows. The popularity of serialised content with special preference towards comedy can also be witnessed in the media consumption preferences of the audience. This gives scope to the idea of forging strong connections with characters for in-depth character exploration that is facilitated by recurring episodes as opposed to standalone shows or films.

Identification and Affinity with Media Characters

Formation of parasocial relationships: Among those interviewed, most of them identified with the character and while parasocial relationships do not require identification for their establishment, shared characteristic features or a similarity in perspective serves to be potential motivation in the formation of parasocial relationships for the media audiences. While "relatability", "a sense of empathy" were mentioned as the reason behind their affinity towards their liked characters more often, respondents also mentioned "a sense of nostalgia", "feeling at ease", "improvement in the mood" as the reasons behind their bond with the characters. One of the respondents mentioned that his favourite character helped him look at the bright side of things, another respondent felt drawn towards successful women characters because she felt a sense of motivation from them. Making sense of one's own life journey, feeling like they are not alone in navigating through life were yet more reasons stated by the respondent reasoning the formation of their bond with their liked characters.

Media Characters and Mental Wellbeing

Media as an emotional crutch: Most of the participants agreed that the consumption of media content does have an impact on their mental wellbeing. They also stated that they have used or use their favourite show/film to cope in a real-life situation. This suggests there is a positive correlation between media consumption and mental wellbeing. While one of the respondents admitted using "cheesy Bollywood romantic comedies" to cope in real life situations and believed in the cathartic effect of consumption of cinematic content with 'self-insertion in the story', another respondent stated that he went back to watching "Tamasha" a Hindi film every time he needed to cope in real life situations. Yet another respondent admitting that the media content has both negative and positive impact emphasised on focusing on the positive impact, while another respondent stated how content consumption could enhance connection, increase self-esteem, enhance self-acceptance, and improve a sense of belonging. However, on the flipside, the responses also highlighted how consumption of media content could also lead to tremendous stress, pressure to compare oneself to others, and increased sadness, isolation. Among other responses, the intentional avoidance towards depressing shows for their impact and a preference towards watching new content to distract oneself were also mentioned as a positive utility of consumption were stated.

Parasocial Relationships and Social Wellbeing

Implications on social well-being: Among the respondents, with an equal number of respondents admitting as well as denying ever choosing parasocial relationships over real-life interactions there exists a fifty percent chance of parasocial relationships being preferred over social interaction and vice versa. Many believe that parasocial relationships have an impact on their real-life relationships and stated that they feel supported by the character they are drawn to suggesting there being media's contribution in navigation through real-life situations comparable to real life relationships.

Comparing parasocial relationships with real-life interactions, respondents highlighted motivation, observational learning, absence of judgments in parasocial relationships as reasons to prefer parasocial relationships over real life relationships. One of the respondents also mentioned that if there's something similar going on in real life as to one in the media her decisions would get influenced by the media she consumes. According to one respondent, media content has an influence on him, especially in the idea of romance.

One of the respondents felt that the characters helped him understand a situation while real life relationships show him a way to cope. Another response elucidated on feeling more understood with

media characters and does not run the risk of being misunderstood.

However, a respondent stated feeling that real life interactions could be exciting while parasocial relationships can lack that at times while another respondent felt supported by her favourite characters but she finds support from real life interactions to be 'customised' to her needs and catered to her situation better, unlike a character who's saying a scripted thing.

Elucidating about their interaction with the media, one of the respondents stated that consuming content has greatly improved his sense of humour and he felt a lot more at ease during face-to-face conversations.

The above analysis gives us a clear picture on the increase in the dependency of the youth on media, the factors that affect the formation of parasocial bonds with media characters like relatability, nostalgia, empathy, etc. Providing insight on the impact of parasocial connections with media characters on the mental well health of the youth, it also gives a scope to explore the social implications of such connection.

Analysis of the Survey Questionnaire Results

With the thorough exploration on the subject, the study reveals that the media audience preferred consuming media content that features specific media figures like media characters. Overall, 84.5% of respondents agreed that they have favourite on-screen media characters that they like to go back to from time to time. This suggests that the media audience actively sought content related to certain media characters. Responding to whether the participant thought about these characters beyond the screen time watching them, 72% of the respondents agreed to it, suggesting the likelihood in the formation of parasocial relationships according to Dibble, J. L., Hartmann, T., & Rosaen, S. F. (2016). Further, 67% of the respondents preferring to "discussing them with friends or online communities" and 61.5% choosing "following their social media accounts" affirms the formation of parasocial relationships. Adding to this, statements like, "they enhance my overall happiness and satisfaction" were chosen by 68%, "they provide emotional support during difficult times" by 64% of the respondents, demonstrates the extent of one-sided non-reciprocal emotional bond in the relationship.

Among the respondents, 76% of the respondents stated "Their personality and traits" to have been a reliable factor in the development of parasocial relationships as opposed to only 24% stating "Their appearance and physical features" to have been the reason. In response to the preferences in character type, the most preferred were, "Witty Sarcastic Ones" "Geniuses", "Complex Anti-Hero". For the

respondents flaws in media characters that hindered a potentially great plot from reaching a wider audience were "Lack of depth and flat characterization" followed by "Lack of relatability" and then "Excessive predictability".

In the context of social wellbeing, though, the respondents found media characters can be helpful in "Understanding real-life relationships" and the parasocial relationships to be motivating for the media consumer to realise their potential and contribute to the society. However, a preference towards parasocial relationships over real-life interactions and activities like spending time outdoors, engaging with hobbies, volunteering, etc. was reflected from the survey. Moreover, the presence of "Social comparison with fictional characters" and "Setting unrealistic expectations for real-life relationships" demonstrated a potential negative impact of parasocial relationships on the social wellbeing of the respondents.

Discussion and Recommendations:

The study reveals that the media audience preferred consuming media content that features specific media characters. This suggests that the media audience actively sought content related to certain media characters. Moreover, the media characters they sought to watch were revisited from time to time suggesting a sense of attachment with the characters. A considerable percentage of the media audience also admitted thinking about these media characters beyond the on-screen consumption, suggesting the likelihood in the formation of parasocial relationships. The findings of the study also show that "Identification" as a factor contributes significantly to the development of parasocial relationships where there is either a sense of shared perspective or shared characteristic feature, however, "admiration for a character with respect to their traits and qualities" influence the development of parasocial relationship. Empathy in terms of identification as mentioned earlier along with a perceived sense of friendliness impact parasocial interaction.

In character traits, the "personality and traits" yet again were found to be reliable as factors in development of parasocial relationships with "humour and wit", "vulnerability and authenticity" coming next. It is noteworthy to see that the "appearance and physical features" have not been considered anywhere close to being the primary determinants.

Moreover, the study revealed that prolonged and in-depth character exploration facilitated stronger connections and suggested that character design in media characters that hindered a potentially great plot from reaching a wider audience were "lack of depth and flat characterization", "lack of relatability", and "excessive predictability".

In the context of mental wellbeing, the results revealed positive correlation between mental wellbeing and media content consumption. It also shows that the respondents find enhancement in overall happiness and satisfaction, and rely on media content and characters as sources of emotional support during difficult times

The study recommends:

- Media characters can be actively chosen to enhance one's mental well-being with functions like 'coping', 'mood upliftment', etc.
- The characterization of media characters needs to prioritise "qualities and traits" in the characters over "physical appearance and features" to enhance character arcs and facilitate parasocial relationships that can consequently be used for enhancing socio-emotional and mental well-being.
- More real depiction in characters could contribute to the reduction in comparison with media characters and setting unrealistic expectations towards real-life interactions.
- Further study on enhancing the awareness of the media audience could help foster healthier and more active parasocial relationships adding to the positive aspects and minimising the negative impact of parasocial relationships with media characters.
- Parasocial Relationships can be leveraged into promoting social good and motivating media audiences to contribute to society.

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