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The Effect of Relational and Interactive Aspects of Parasocial Experiences on Attitudes and
Message Resistance

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Abstract

The study examines direct and interactive effects of parasocial interactions (PSIs) and relationships (PSRs) on reactance, counterarguing and message-consistent attitudes. PSIs and PSRs are conceptualized as distinct constructs. PSIs involve the give-and-take within the media encounter, whereas PSRs entail the relational bonding with the media figure that continues to exist outside the context of any particular media exposure. A 2 (high/low PSIs) X 2 (high/low PSRs) experiment reveals that PSIs can actually increase counterarguing and reactance, particularly when PSRs are low. The effect of PSRs did not achieve significance ($p < .09$). No significant effects of PSRs/PSIs on attitudes were found.

The Effect of Relational and Interactive Aspects of Parasocial Experiences on Attitudes and Message Resistance

In a seminal paper, Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced two modes of involvement with the media: parasocial relationships (PSRs) defined as “seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer” and parasocial interactions defined as “simulacrum of conversational give-and-take” (p. 215). Although both terms have been introduced over half a century ago, terminological confusion has dominated the field. The term “PSI” was used by some scholars broadly, in reference to relational aspects of parasocial experiences, while other scholars used the terms “PSI” and “PSR” interchangeably. The widely accepted PSI scale (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985) both reflected and ossified this definitional confusion. In the last decade, a case has been made for the need for a more nuanced conceptualization and measurement of parasocial experiences, differentiating between these distinct, albeit related, facets (Hartman & Goldhoorn, 2011; Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). The present study adds to these efforts by examining PSIs and PSRs as two distinct phenomena, and ascertaining their unique (and interactive) contribution to persuasion, specifically, message resistance and attitudes.

The Case for PSRs/PSIs Distinction

PSIs occur during the media exposure. They involve heightened attention towards the media figure (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011), and are based on perceived reciprocity and a sense of immediacy (Hartmann, 2008). Viewers feel as if they were present in a social situation involving the media figure and the media figure is aware of their presence (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Klimmt et al., 2006). As in non-mediated social interactions, in PSIs, verbal and physical cues (such as eye-contact) can promote a greater experience of a two-way conversation (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011).

Whereas PSIs focus on interactions occurring during media exposure, PSRs continue to exist outside the media exposure context. In PSRs, media consumers feel a relationship with a character, even when in a given moment they are not consuming media featuring that character. For example, Horton and Wohl (1956) recount the example of a young woman whose crush on a television star interfered with her “real” life. Similarly, participants in qualitative studies have described PSRs saying that they come to think of their favorite television characters as “friends and colleagues” (p. 70, Livingstone, 1988). Studies have found that interpersonal attachment styles predicted sustained attachment to media characters in a manner that resembles non-mediated relationship formation (e.g., Cohen, 1997). Tukachinsky (2010) further showed that PSRs can parallel specific forms of social relationships, including friendships and romantic relationships. Furthermore, PSRs for the most part followed social relationship maintenance models (Eyal & Dailey, 2012) and the intensity of the PSRs was linked to greater distress following the dissolution of the relationship (Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

Undoubtedly, the two forms of involvement are related and often intertwined (Klimmt et al., 2006). Just as interpersonal relationships evolve and deepen through reoccurring interactions, so too can PSRs grow and develop through repeated PSIs. Similarly, as the depth and quality of interactions can vary depending on the nature of the a-priori relationship between the communicating parties, so too can the PSI can be more intense when a viewer has an already established PSRs with the performer. Despite these interrelationships, acknowledging the distinctions between PSIs and PSRs is necessary to examine more nuanced theoretical mechanisms of involvement, including possible interactive effects of these constructs.

Moreover, although PSI/PSR were hypothesized to play a critical role in facilitating media effects and persuasion (e.g., Moyer-Gusé, 2008), a recent meta-analysis revealed high

variability of effect sizes of PSIs/PSRs in the media effects and persuasion literature with the mean effect size being small and not significant (Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013). It is possible that operationalization ambiguity lead to such inconsistent findings. It is also possible that differentiation between PSI and PSR could reveal stronger effects of one type of parasocial experiences that were masked by the other facet. To examine this possibility, the present study builds on the accepted PSI/PSR distinction and examines the distinct effect of each construct on persuasion.

Persuasion, PSIs and PSRs

PSIs/PSRs were found in a variety of mediated contexts from responses to fictional characters (e.g., Rubin & Perse, 1987), to attachment to athletes (Sun & Wu, 2012), demonstrating the pervasiveness and diversity of parasocial experiences. It is, therefore, important to understand PSIs/PSRs as part of a common human experience and a pivotal aspect of engagement with media. As with media involvement in general, PSIs/PSRs were approached from two perspectives (for review see Wirth, 2006). First, audience research identified some of the precursors and characteristics of PSRs, and their role in media selection and gratifications. Second, media involvement became a focal component of the persuasion and media effects research, ascertaining the consequences of engagement with media figures especially in areas such as health communication.

Although a number of studies have examined the predictive power of PSIs/PSRs directly on persuasive outcomes, it was not always clear whether *interactive* experiences during the media exposure, or *relational* aspects of the bonding between the viewer and the media figure predict media effects. To add to the confusion, even when the researchers' rationale and hypotheses referred specifically to PSRs, they typically used the same PSI scale that was

employed by other authors to examine effects of PSIs. For example, in some studies, the PSI measure was completed immediately following exposure to the message featuring health-related content (e.g., Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010) whereas other studies used the same scale to measure response to a media figure in general, not within a context of a specific media encounter (e.g., Brown, et al., 2003). These studies exemplify the diversity of parasocial phenomena, and the difficulty to extrapolate the unique effect of PSI or PSR from past studies.

Furthermore, each study typically narrowed its focus specifically to one facet of the parasocial experience. However, although PSRs and PSIs are distinct processes, they also are likely to interact. It is reasonable to postulate that the same interaction can have different implications when occurs within a context of an established relationship or outside of a meaningful preexisting relationship. To further investigate these nuances, it is important to assess both PSIs and PSRs in the same study and examine their main and interactive effects. Building on past research that revealed effects of PSIs and PSRs on post-viewing attitudes, it is hypothesized that:

H_{1a}: There is a positive relationship between PSIs and message-consistent attitudes.

H_{1b}: There is a positive relationship between PSRs and message-consistent attitudes.

In the absence of a solid research tradition that empirically differentiates between the two phenomena, a research question is posed:

RQ₁: Is there an interactive effect between PSIs and PSRs on message-consistent attitudes?

PSI/PSR and resistance. Theories of persuasion have pointed at the potential for PSI/PSR to minimize message resistance. When individuals encounter a persuasive message, they often engage in one of several forms of message resistance that can minimize the effect of

media on persuasive outcomes. However, PSIs/PSRs were hypothesized to minimize message resistance (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

One type of resistance to persuasive attempts, involves reactance. It has been suggested that individuals strive for exercising and maintaining freedom (Brehm, 1966). Feelings of restricted control or behavioral freedom can lead to “boomerang” effects or individuals attempting to regain control by behaving *opposite* of the message intention (Quick & Stephenson, 2007). However, messages coming from peers are experienced as less authoritative and posing less threat on one’s freedom, thus resulting in lower reactance (Burgoon, Alvaro, Grandpre, & Voloudakis, 2002). By extension, it has been postulated that when the source of the media message is a likable actor that viewers see as part of their social circle, the persuasive message does not appear as controlling, and provokes less reactance (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Indeed, PSRs with a fictional television character were associated with lower reactance to the persuasive message embedded in the narrative (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010) or even with an overtly persuasive appeal delivered by the actor by reducing the perceived persuasive intent of the message (Moyer-Gusé, Jain & Chung 2012).

Another form of persuasion resistance is counterarguing. Here, message recipients have cognitions that “dispute or are inconsistent with the persuasive argument” (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 180). Counterarguing prompts message scrutiny minimizes its effects as a result. Some evidence has suggested embedding information in a story, for example, can reduce counterarguing because individuals are absorbed into the plot events and characters (e.g., Niederdeppe, Shapiro, & Porticella, 2011). It is apparent that different foci and presentation of the same information leads to different thought patterns, which in turn can lead to different forms of elaboration and counterarguing (Niederdeppe, Kim, Lundell, Fazili, & Frazier, 2012). Because

PSIs/PSRs can promote positive emotion and attachment to pseudo-friends, it would be reasonable to assume that viewers would be less likely to argue back to the claims put forth by the media character. Viewers likely have greater willingness to listen and internalize propositions to a para-friend. Moreover, it has been postulated that if PSRs can reduce perceived persuasive intent, then viewers should be less inclined to scrutinize the message and pick it apart (Moyer-Guse et al., 2012). It is therefore hypothesized:

H_{2a}: There is a negative relationship between PSIs and message-consistent attitudes.

H_{2b}: There is a negative relationship between PSIs and message-consistent attitudes.

Since past research did not explore the influence of PSIs on the relationship between PSRs and counterarguing and reactance a research question is posed:

RQ₂: Is there an interactive effect of PSI and PSR on counterarguing and reactance?

Method

Participants and Procedures

Undergraduate students from two large universities were invited to participate in the study to fulfill their research participation requirements. The experiment was web-based. However, about a third of the participants completed the study in a university computer lab, whereas the rest of the participants accessed the study online in a location of their choice. There were no detectable differences between response patterns of students from the two institutions and respondents in the different settings. A special effort was made to ensure data quality. First, the amount of time spent on the video stimulus page was monitored to eliminate participants who evidently did not watch the entire clip or were distracted by other activities. Second, an attention check item was embedded in the middle of the questionnaire in a battery of filler a “yes”/”no” questions (“I am not paying attention to this question”). Finally, participants’ ability to play and

hear the stimulus video properly was ensured. Prior to completing the study, subjects were exposed to a 4-second-long test video featuring animals and a voice-over reciting the ABC. Participants were directed to play the video and indicate what they have heard. Together, these measures resulted in removal of 17 subjects from the dataset.

The final sample was comprised of 96 participants ages 18 to 24 ($M=19.81$, $SD=1.38$). The majority of the subjects were female (83%). Fifty-nine respondents (61%) identified themselves as White, 17% were Asian Americans, 20% Latinos, 3% Black, and the rest were or mixed or other ethnicity.

Stimulus

To manipulate media consumers' experience of PSRs and PSIs with the media figure, four versions of a public service announcement were created (high/low PSRs x high/low PSIs). Prior to the study, extensive pilot-testing was used to identify media figures with which the target population has strong PSRs. First, a separate sample of students was asked to list their favorite media personalities. Then, another sample of students was asked to report their level of PSRs (using Rubin's et al. 1985 scale) with the most commonly nominated characters and actors who also made appearance in a public service announcement. Based on the results of these pilot tests, the *Do something!* campaign featuring Chace Crawford (who stars the popular TV drama *Gossip Girl*) was chosen to serve as the basis for the study. In the ad, the actor states statistics about homeless youth, indicates that "homeless people are just ordinary people in a bad situation" and makes self-efficacy and response-efficacy statements about the opportunity to help homeless individuals by donating jeans for charity. Four versions of the ad were then created manipulating the level of relational and interactional parasocial experience.

PSRs manipulation. A replica of Crawford's ad was filmed, featuring an unknown professional actor similar to Crawford on physical attributes including age, ethnicity and attractiveness. All of the study participants correctly identified the celebrity in the high PSR condition, however, none of the viewers recognized the actor in the low PSR condition.

PSIs manipulation. High PSIs version of the ad included visual and verbal interactive components, including eye contact and direct address that breaks the "fourth wall" between the media personality and the viewer (Auter & Davis, 1991). The actor looked directly into the camera and started the message by saying "Hi, my name is Chace." Conversely, in the low PSIs condition, a still picture of the actor looking off camera was used. The picture was coupled with the actor's own voice-over delivering the message without the interactive components of greeting and the minimizing direct address (e.g., "My name is Chace").

Measures

After watching the ad, viewers were asked to report their PSRs and PSIs with the actor, counterarguing with the message, reactance and attitudes and behavioral intentions related to the message. All items were assessed on a seven-point scale ranging from "*Strongly Disagree*" to "*Strongly Agree*" (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

PSIs. Hartmann and Goldhoorn's (2011) six-item scale was used to assess the extent to which the viewers experienced a parasocial interaction with the actor (e.g., "The person in the clip was talking personally to me", $\alpha = .91$).

PSRs. Rubin and Perse's (1987) short (10-item) version of Rubin et al.'s (1985) 20-item PSI scale was used. The short version not only reduces fatigue but also has a greater face validity tapping into relational aspects of the parasocial experience (e.g., "He makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend", $\alpha = .90$).

Reactance. The cognitive dimension of reactance was assessed using a five-item scale (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010) that included items such as “The PSA tried to pressure me to think a certain way”. ($\alpha = .90$).

Counterarguing. Moyer-Gusé, et al.’s (2012) four-item scale was used, including items such as “While watching the PSA, I sometimes felt like I wanted to ‘argue back’ to what was going on onscreen.” ($\alpha = .87$).

Message-consistent attitudes. Attitudes were assessed as agreement with four statements that were mentioned in the PSA (e.g., “Homeless people are just ordinary people in a bad situation”, $\alpha = .88$).

Control variables. Finally, given that demographic similarity with the actor and demographics could promote the persuasiveness of the message, participants’ sex (dummy coded “1” = *male*, “0” = *female*) and race (“1” = *White*, “0” = *ethnic minority*) were included as control variables.

Manipulation Check and Analyses

Manipulation check revealed that as intended, each manipulation affected either PSIs or PSRs. The PSIs manipulation had a strong effect on PSIs (Cohen’s $d = 1.23$, $t(94)=5.95$, $p <.001$) but there was no significant effect of PSIs manipulation on PSR ($p =.43$). Similarly, PSRs manipulation had a strong effect on reported PSRs (Cohen’s $d =.91$, $t(94)=4.39$, $p <.001$) but not on PSIs ($p =.86$). Moreover, the high and low PSRs conditions did not significantly vary in perceived attractiveness and expertise of the speaker ($p >.30$).

To test the hypotheses, three sets of regression models examined the main effects of PSRs and PSIs on attitudes, counterarguing and reactance. Following O’Keefe (2003), since the viewers’ psychological engagement with the speaker rather than message characteristics were

hypothesized to influence attitudes and message resistance, mean-centered PSRs and PSIs scores were used as predictors in lieu of the manipulation conditions. Participants' ethnicity and sex were used as controls. The main effects were entered in the first step, followed by an interaction term. Decomposition of significant interactions was performed using Hayes' PROCESS model.

Results

It was hypothesized that both PSIs and PSRs will be positively associated with message-consistent attitudes (H1) and negatively related to counterarguing and reactance (H2). RQ1 and RQ2 asked whether PSIs and PSRs interact predicting these outcomes.

Reactance. There was no significant main effect of PSRs ($B = .20, S.E. = .13, p = .13$) but contrary to the hypothesis, PSIs had a significant *positive* effect on reactance ($B = .42, S.E. = .11, p < .001$) ($F(4,91) = 5.56, p < .001, R^2 = .19$). To examine RQ1, the interaction was added to the model ($F(4,91) = 5.43, p < .001, R^2 = .23, \Delta R^2 F(4,1) = 4.51, p < .01$). The interaction was significant ($B = -.17, S.E. = .08, p < .05$). Decomposition of the interaction (see Figure 1) revealed that PSIs only increased reactance when PSRs were low ($B = .66, S.E. = .16, p < .001, C.I. [.35, .97]$) but not when PSRs were high ($B = .22, S.E. = .15, p = .14, C.I. [-.08, .51]$).

Counterarguing. A similar pattern emerged for Counterarguing ($F(4,91) = 2.95, p < .05, R^2 = .15$). There was no significant main effect of PSRs ($B = .20, S.E. = .12, p = .10$) and PSIs had a significantly *increased* counterarguing ($B = .32, S.E. = .11, p < .001$). The variance explained by the model increased ($F(5,90) = 4.22, p < .01, R^2 = .23, \Delta R^2 F(4,1) = 8.33, p < .001$) with the addition of the interaction ($B = -.21, S.E. = .07, p < .01$). Figure 1 depicts the decomposition of the interaction. Again, PSIs were increased reactance when PSRs were low ($B = .62, S.E. = .14, p < .001, C.I. [.33, .91]$) but not when PSRs were high ($B = .06, S.E. = .14, p = .92, C.I. = [-.20, .33]$).

Attitudes. PSRs and PSIs did not have main ($B = .13, S.E. = .09, p = .15, B = .05, S.E. = .08, p = .55$, respectively) or interactive ($B = .02, S.E. = .06, p = .67$) effects on attitudes ($F(5,90) = 1.10, p < .05$). To summarize, although PSIs and PSRs did not affect attitudes, parasocial experiences had an effect on reactance and counterarguing, albeit not in the predicted direction.

Discussion

The study contributes to our understanding of the role that parasocial experiences play in persuasion. First, this study includes both constructs of PSI and PSR in a single study and is the first to explore the potentially interactive effects of PSIs and PSRs. Furthermore, this inquiry adds to a limited body of research on PSR/PSI and message resistance variables -- counterarguing and reactance.

The major finding of the current study is that PSIs in itself might actually facilitate rather than inhibit counterarguing and reactance but high PSRs can shield from this effect. This seemingly counter-intuitive result may not be surprising at a closer look. PSIs entail engaging in a real give-and-take with the character and feeling the media figure's presence in the interaction (Hartmann, 2008). Presence is often thought of as related to positive responses and enjoyment (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). However, there is nothing to suggest that the consequences of this increased presence could also be undesirable. Conceivably, when viewers are engrossed in an interaction with the actor, they are more likely to "talk back" to and argue with the media persona (i.e., counterarguing), and feel that their freedom is more threatened (i.e., reactance). Conversely, a more passive consumption of the message when the viewer does not mentally "converse" with the message sender, has also less opportunity for arguing or feeling being attacked by the speaker.

PSRs serve an important role in this process. When PSRs are high, the interaction is more likely to have an overall positive valence, since deep relational attachment to the character and a sense of friendship evoke positive emotions. This, in turn can bias the interaction in a more message-consistent manner. However, high PSIs without prior close relationships will have a higher chance of becoming argumentative and pose a threat on the message recipient's sense of freedom. Importantly, PSRs alone, without PSIs, do not considerably buffer counterarguing and reactance. The positive emotional response to the media figure is therefore not sufficient and addressing of the message content (through PSIs) also seems to be critical for the persuasion process.

From an E-ELM perspective (Slater & Rouner, 2002) the "give-and-take" in parasocial experiences can, perhaps, promote greater elaboration. However, PSRs determines the nature of this elaboration. The elaboration could be negatively biased (arguing back, disagreeing) when the media persona is a stranger. Conversely, when the viewer has an ongoing PSR with the speaker, the interaction can be positive. In other words, it could be the case that viewers in both high PSIs conditions engaged in more deliberation of the message ("discussing it" in their imagination with the performer) but the relational context of this interaction biases the course of the elaboration.

Interestingly, the present study did not detect effects of either PSIs or PSRs on message-consistent attitudes. These findings echo the results of a recent meta-analysis that revealed that many studies fail to detect effects of PSRs on attitudes, knowledge and behavioral intentions (with the average effect of studies being non-significant) (Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013). However, typically studies explore either PSIs or PSRs, while our study found evidence of an interaction between the two constructs. Thus, not only does our study empirically test what several researchers have posited, and even encouraged, future work to explore, but we also

uncovered the critical need to examine both processes together, as they relate to each other. Perhaps considering both types of parasocial experience and the link between message reactance and elaboration, could further improve predictive ability of these phenomena and explain null findings in past research (Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013).

Study Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of this particular study pose intriguing questions worth further exploration. First, the study is limited to a single message and sample, and it is important to replicate these results with other stimuli and audiences. For example, would the specific topic or the persuasive appeal moderate the relationship between PSIs, PSRs and response to the message? Although viewers' sex is used as a control variable, one can speculate about the role that it plays in this process given that the majority of the sample was female and the actor was an attractive male (indeed, sex was a significant predictor of reactance and attitudes in the regression analyses, indicating that men experienced greater reactance and less message-consistent attitudes than women $p < .05$, $\beta = 1.08$, $S.E. = .42$, $p < .05$, $\beta = -.67$, $S.E. = .30$, respectively). One reason could be that heterosexual viewers are more likely to engage in romantic-PSRs with opposite-sex characters and more prone to friendship-like PSRs with same-sex characters (Tukachinsky, 2010). Conceivably, these different varieties of PSRs could have different implications for persuasion.

Second, unfortunately, the overall levels of PSRs and PSIs in the current study were not as high as they ideally should have been. The results of the study are valid given that participants reported a wide range of parasocial experiences (1-6.57 for PSIs and 1-6.20 for PSR on a 7-point scale), and the differences between high and low conditions were significant (as described in the manipulation check section). However, nonetheless, the mean levels of PSRs and PSIs in the

“high” conditions were medium rather than very high (see Table 1). Using the actual PSIs and PSRs scores in lieu of experimental conditions helps to overcome this limitation, but there is still a need to develop a stronger manipulation of these constructs.

Finally, the study used a relatively crude measure of reactance. Although this measure has been used in part PSRs research (e.g., Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010), it is valuable to distinguishing between reactance to the message itself and the message argument, and consider affective aspects of reactance (e.g., anger). A more open-ended approach, such as thought-listing (e.g., Niederdeppe et al., 2011, Niederdeppe et al., 2012), might be able to further unearth nuances. Nonetheless, the current findings provide new insights and using previously used items allows for greater comparison and extension of their findings.

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