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Theorizing Development of Parasocial Engagement

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Abstract

The manuscript proposes a theoretical model of the development of parasocial relationships (PSRs) building on Knapp's model of relationship development. Through synthesis of research across disciplines, the model conceptualizes the relational goals and parasocial interactions (PSIs) specific to the PSR. The model identifies variables that predict engagement at that level, describes the stage's outcomes/effects, and considers the utility of existing measures to assess these stages. The conceptualization of PSRs as a dynamic process rather than intensity of a monolithic experience offers new directions worthy of empirical examination.

Theorizing Development of Parasocial Engagement

Horton and Wohl (1956) coined the terms parasocial relationship (PSR) and parasocial interaction (PSI) to refer to media users' involvement with media personae. PSI is defined as "a felt reciprocity with a TV performer that comprises a sense of mutual awareness, attention, and adjustment" (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011, p. 1107). Whereas PSIs entail reactions to the media representations during media exposure (e.g., talking back to the character) PSRs are conceptualized as a generalized emotional and cognitive involvement with the character that can occur outside the context of any particular media exposure situation (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). More recently, Stever (2013) noted that media consumers form parasocial attachment (PSA) by deriving felt security from the PSR.

These phenomena have been documented across the lifespan (Bond, 2016; Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005), in various media contexts (e.g., Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). Research on parasocial engagement (as a collective term for PSI/PSR/PSA) across disciplines uncovered implications for human development (Stever, 2013) and culture (Duffet, 2013). Not only does parasocial engagement lie in the core of media enjoyment and use (e.g., Hartmann, Stuke, & Daschmann, 2008), it also promotes a wide range of media effects. For example, PSRs with health care providers and celebrities with a medical condition increase intention to seek treatment and reduce health stigma (Hoffner & Cohen, 2017; Rasmussen & Ewoldsen, 2016). Parasocial engagement can enhance individuals' self-perception (Derrkck, Gabriel, & Tippin, 2008) and inform their expectations from real-life relationships (Tukachinsky & Dorros, 2018). Provided how pervasive and consequential parasocial engagement is, a greater understanding of this phenomenon is paramount.

PSRs are mostly conceptualized as monolithic and static. The notion that PSR evolves over time is not new (e.g., Klimmt et al., 2006) but has not been incorporated into empirical research and theory. For example, with rare exceptions (e.g., Giles & Maltby, 2004) PSR measures assess engagement as intensity of the experience on a unidimensional scale ranging from "low" to "high" PSR (in fact, in some studies, samples were divided into "high" and "low" PSR, e.g., Tukachinsky, 2015; Young, Gabriel, & Hollar, 2013). This is not a methodological oversight but a reflection of the conceptualization of PSR as something that is either "on," "off," or somewhere in between rather than as an evolving experience. This description of PSRs is overly simplistic not adequately reflecting the complexity of parasocial phenomena.

The current manuscript builds on existing research, proposing an overarching theoretical model of the *development* of PSRs wherein individuals feel positively towards the media figure (negative PSRs wherein individuals dislike the character [see Hartmann et al., 2008], lies outside the scope of the present theorization). PSRs are conceptualized here as a staged process, suggesting that individuals do not necessarily differ merely in intensity of their experience, but rather undergo qualitatively distinct processes specific to relational stages. Drawing connections across distinct literatures, the model advances the field by identifying gaps in the literature and providing a new understanding of past research. What appears to be mixed findings could be explained by the fact that the same variables play very different roles during the various stages of PSRs. Conceptualization of PSR stages and their relationships to PSIs, PSA and other phenomena advances measurement, and poses new theoretical propositions worth empirical investigation. The goal of the manuscript is, therefore, to (1) reconceptualize PSRs as a staged process; (2) organize the literature using the novel overarching approach; and (3) derive testable predictions situated in theory that provide a roadmap for future research.

A Model of PSR Development

It has long been argued that PSRs are organized by the same mental models that guide actual relationships (e.g., Bond & Calvert 2014; J. Cohen, 1997). Several attempts have been made to apply theories of interpersonal relationships and interactions, such as social exchange and uncertainty reduction to examine PSRs and PSIs (e.g., Branch, Wilson, & Agnew, 2013; Eyal & Dailey, 2012; Perse & Rubin, 1989). However, there is still a need for an overarching organizational approach for understanding the development of PSRs and situating it within the broader context of media involvement and media effects literature.

Assuming an underlying similarity between how social and parasocial encounters are cognitively managed, the current paper applies Knapp's model (Knapp, 1978; Knapp et al., 2014) of interpersonal relationships to PSRs. The original model describes five stages of relationship building, and five stages of relationship dissolution. The model specifically focuses on close, positive relationships, and identifies the distinct goals, concrete communicative behaviors, and emotional and cognitive processes specific to each stage (Avtgis, West, & Anderson, 1998). We propose that positive PSRs also evolve through similar stages of coming together, moving from *initiation* –impression formation of the media figure, to *experimentation* – seeking breadth (rather than depth) or exposure to the media figure, followed by *intensification* and *integration* – establishing and maintaining a relationship with the media figure. Knapp's fifth stage (*bonding*) is not included for reasons discussed below in the model itself. Although Knapp's model also articulates steps of relationship dissolution the present theoretical effort is only limited to the stages of coming together. The proposed model is based on several propositions:

1. *Each stage has unique cognitive, affective, and behavioral manifestations (although some characteristics continue to endure in multiple stages after they first occur).*

Each stage of Knapp's interpersonal model is characterized by unique communicative and relational phenomena. However, some behaviors can persist in multiple stages (e.g., discussion of intimate topics emerges in the intensification stage, but continues on the integration and bonding stages as well). Likewise, a PSR can be manifested in similar ways in different stages. Importantly, however, although some aspects of different stages may appear to overlap, the unique combination of these factors can create a distinct set of characteristics typical to a given stage. For example, media users will be motivated to seek further exposure to the character at each PSR stage, however, they will do so for different reasons (e.g., to reduce uncertainty vs. in quest for intimacy). While attraction is likely to be high in every stage of PSRs, different aspects of attraction are likely to be more important in driving the PSR at each stage. These unique characteristics can be used in operationalization of the different relational stages.

A multitude of scales have already been developed to assess engagement with media figures. Unfortunately, many of the items in these scales tap into multiple stages of a PSR and do not provide sufficient specificity to differentiate between parasocial relational stages. Nonetheless, certain items from existing measures (or some adaptation of existing items) fit specific stages of PSRs and can be combined into adequate PSR stage measures (see Appendix A).

2. *Not all media users go through all the stages. Fewer individuals will move to each subsequent stage.*

As in Knapp's original model, the proposed model does not assume that all individuals advance through all the relational stages. While many media users engage in initiation with multiple media figures, fewer move on to experimentation with a select number of those media figures. Even fewer people will intensify their relationship and fewer still will proceed to

integration. Each person can remain at any stage without progressing further, and each stage can last any amount of time. As explicated in proposition 3, the model identifies the factors that would predict the likelihood of the individual to move into the next stage of the PSR.

3. *Moving from stage to stage is determined by the quality and extent of PSI in previous stages as well as factors that provide the motivation and ability to proceed to the following stages, which involve stage-specific PSI, media figure, and media user characteristics.*

Each stage can vary in its duration from very brief to indefinite. A transition from stage to stage can occur within a single media exposure or can evolve over time across multiple media encounters. Amount of exposure, therefore, cannot be equated to a relational stage. The quality and extent of PSIs at previous stages of the PSR and the media figure characteristics provide an opportunity for advancing the relationship further. However, motivational factors and viewers' ability to engage in a PSR are necessary for progression. These variables can be generally classified as related to PSI, the media figure, or the media user. PSI variables, defined as characteristics of the media encounter that are not inherent to the media user or the media figure her/himself, can include contextual variables (e.g., binge/traditional viewing), embedded interaction cues (e.g., close-up shot), and viewer-character interactions (e.g., talking back to the character). Media figure characteristics are defined as the content of the person-schema, based on information inferred from the media encounter (e.g., morality judgments). Media user variables entail aspects of an individual that provide motivation and ability to advance the relationship to the next stage (e.g., desire for intimacy).

4. *Each stage of the PSR is associated with relational outcomes as well as broader consequences, such as media effects.*

The model links the proposed PSR stages to past media studies, considering the consequences of experiencing each PSR stage going beyond relationship development. Thereby, the model makes predictions about how PSR stages fit into the media effects/psychology literatures. Specifically, it is posited here that certain media effects can occur at lower stages of the model, while others require a deeper relationship formed at higher stages of the model.

The following paragraphs discuss, in-depth, each PSR stage.

Initiation

In Knapp's original model, initiation refers to the first interaction between two individuals meeting each other for the first time. This stage involves formation of first impression and it is uniquely characterized by a combination of high attraction and high uncertainty – knowing very little about each other but being driven to learn more. To navigate this stage, individuals closely follow social norms and only explore superficial topics in their conversation.

In the same way, initiation of a PSR entails forming a first impression of the media figure by integrating media-figure cues with existing schemas and knowledge (Klimmt, et al. 2006). On a *cognitive* level, uncertainty is high. Individuals' attention and critical evaluation of the character is high and audience members can employ heuristics (e.g., social stereotypes, attractiveness) or scrutinize the character, critically evaluate him or her, and engage in social comparisons (between oneself or other people and the figure). On an *affective* level, individuals can feel physical attraction to the character (based on characteristics that can be easily ascertained in a first encounter). These result in a *behavioral* intention to seek further exposure to the media figure in order to reduce uncertainty and predict desirability of the prospective relationship.

Similar to Knapp's original model, initiation can be relatively brief since it only entails superficial communication ("small talk" equivalent). However, depending on the content of the media message, the relationship may begin advancing into the experimentation phase even during the first media exposure provided that it satisfies the goals of the first stage and offers fodder for the subsequent stage.

Initiation predictors. In the contemporary media environment, media users are exposed to numerous media personalities, and not every exposure initiates a PSR (Klimmt et al., 2006). Thus, often, when PSRs do initiate, media consumers already recognize the media figure. The factors that contribute to the initiation of PSRs are viewer characteristics and character-variables that can be gleaned from a brief exposure to the character. Cues in the media interact with viewer characteristics to produce impression formation based on heuristics and schema-based variables. This step largely overlaps with impression formation and developing dispositions based on media-based mental models, as viewers engage in automatic evaluative processes that results in a first impression that is then stored in a relationship schema (Klimmt et al., 2006).

Character variables. Impressions can be guided by schemas (e.g., genre or prior familiarity with the media figure) such that schema-based expectancies drive dispositions (Raney, 2004). Additionally, viewers monitor the characters' behaviors and evaluate the characters' actions in terms of their ***morality*** using this to form dispositions towards the characters (Zillmann, 1996). Most mainstream entertainment movies include, early in the script, what script-writers call a "save the cat" moment where the character acts virtuously to allow viewers to form such positive dispositions early in the exposure to the character (Tchernev, 2017).

From a selective exposure perspective, media users often seek out characters that are relevant to the viewers' own situation (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015). Thus, initiation can be based on expected similarities between oneself and the character on dimensions that can be easily ascertained at first encounter with the media-figure or even prior to exposure (e.g., female viewers seeking out a movie with a female lead). Strictly speaking, a match between media users' and media characters' properties requires a consideration of both audience and media characteristics, but for the sake of simplicity it is considered here as a character variable.

Similar to interpersonal relationship formation (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973) physical attractiveness (including sex-appeal) can give rise to PSRs (Stever, 1991). Attractiveness is likely to play a particularly meaningful role in the initiation stage given its resilience in absence of "deeper" information. However, as in interpersonal relationships (Sprecher & Regan, 1998), the PSR matures as the role of attraction and passion may decline. That is not to say that attraction necessarily disappears altogether, but that it is no longer the factor that drives the relationship.

Audience variables. Initiation of PSRs can be guided by seeking gratification of particular needs. For example, *social identity needs* can predict exposure to television shows featuring characters boosting the viewers' social identity (Harwood, 1999). Furthermore, media consumption is often a social experience. Fandom research suggests that initiation may result from encouragement from family and significant others (Stever, 2009). More broadly, individuals may be compelled to initiate a PSR with a character in order to be in tune with others in one's social environment (Ducheneaut et al., 2008). Thus, the *perceived popularity* of the character or having friends who formed a PSR with the character promotes initiation of the

relationship with him/her, although this may not play a role later on when the relationship has advanced to subsequent stages (Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

PSI characteristics. Certain features of the media message can present PSI cues that foster a sense of interaction and facilitate initiation. For example, screen-size can offer special cues equivalent to proxemics in interpersonal relationships that contribute to impression-formation (Lombard, 1995). Similarly, breaking the fourth-wall by directly addressing the audience, and maintaining eye contact create an illusion of a face-to-face interaction (Auter, 1992; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011).

Initiation effects. Even the first stage of PSRs can influence media users by increasing attention to the media figure, and thus promoting information retention and social comparison. Importantly, a unique discrepancy between PSIs and PSRs emerges at this point. On the one hand, viewers still have not yet established a relationship with the character, and they feel high levels of interpersonal uncertainty about the media figure and the desirability of this potential PSR. On the other hand, they engage in a PSI with the character. Thus, while overall it has been theorized that PSRs reduce resistance to persuasion (Moyer-Gusé, 2008), at this initial stage, higher levels of scrutiny and interactivity can actually promote counter-arguing and reaction to a persuasive appeal (Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016).

Experimentation

According to Knapp's model, individuals move from initiation to learning more about the other person by examining the extent to which they fit well together. This stage is guided by motivation to reduce uncertainty. Consequently, individuals engage in broader information exchange; however, they are still bound to safe topics and superficial self-disclosure. In like manner, in PSRs, the experimentation stage entails acquiring additional information about the

media personality and integrating it into a more expansive mental model. The main relational

goal at this stage is reducing uncertainty and, as in interpersonal relationships, gathering

information forecasting the relational outcomes (Sunnafrank, 1986). To this end, media users

seek-out additional encounters with the media figure in other outlets (e.g., watching more

episodes of the show). The emphasis is breadth rather than depth of experiences and audience

members are driven by curiosity. More than ever, in a transmedia storytelling environment

(Jenkins, 2012) media users can (and are encouraged to) engage with media figures on multiple

platforms through numerous points of entrance.

Just as in interpersonal relationships (e.g., online dating), individuals use various

information gathering strategies to check for consistency across sources, thus informing the

relational schema and reducing uncertainty (Gibbs, Ellison, & Lai, 2011). Ultimately, multiple

interactions and comparison for consistency across contexts, as well as gathering sufficient

information to form positive relational expectations enables media users to acquire greater

knowledge about the media figure and develop stronger opinions, beliefs and emotions

(including social attraction, liking, and sympathy).

Experimentation predictors.

Character variables. Several character-level variables can lead audiences to progress

from initiation to experimentation with media figures. The first of these variables is objectively

and subjectively perceived viewer-character ***homophily*** in deeper domains than those guiding the

initiation stage. While the initiation stage is limited to apparent characteristics that spark the

initial interest in the media figure, the progression through the experimentation stage is driven by

homophily that emerges from further interaction with the character. In other words, although

similarity serves as a predictor of both initiation and experimentation, at the initiation stage, in

the absence of other character information, judgments of similarity would likely be based on more obvious and stereotypical features (e.g., coming from the working-class, Stever, 2009). However, as the PSR moves into the experimentation stage, deeper dimensions of similarity (e.g., attitudinal similarity) take precedence over demographic similarity (Turner, 1993). As the relationship continues to grow in subsequent stages, the importance of similarity in driving the relationship will cease (as alluded to by Tian and Hoffner, 2010 showing that similarity only differentiates between disliked characters and neutral/liked ones).

Finally, *accessibility* of the media figure fosters experimentation in the same way that proximity facilitates interpersonal relationship formation. For instance a regular character in a television show or in a trilogy, offers more opportunities than does a character making few guest appearances or starring in a stand-alone movie.

Audience variables. First, at this stage, PSRs can be driven by *attraction* based on social and task/talent dimensions (Stever, 1991), as this information is being discovered through continued exposure but it was not apparent to the media users at the initiation stage that was mostly driven by physical attraction. Second, experimentation can be related to viewers' *playfulness*. According to Hartmann (2008), since PSIs are not symmetrical, media users have the choice of taking part in the "game" of imaginary interaction. Playfulness can be conceptualized as a relatively stable individual difference involving a propensity to engage with characters (akin to transportability; Bilandzic & Busselle, 2011). Alternatively, playfulness can be viewed as a temporary state of mind that depends on motivation and ability to engage with characters (Hartmann, 2008).

PSI variables. Experiences during the initiation stage play a key role in fostering experimentation. Media users often engage in PSI behaviors with both liked and disliked

characters (e.g., shouting at characters: "be careful!" or "shut up!;" Dibble & Rosaen, 2011). The *amount and the valance of such PSI* during the media exposure should be predictive of subsequent PSR development. Finally, PSRs might be impacted by the *mode of viewing* with a more condensed ("binge") viewing being associated with a stronger PSR compared to watching in weekly intervals, presumably since this mode of media consumption accelerates the experimentation stage (Tukachinsky & Eyal, 2018).

Experimentation effects. As viewers become more engaged with the characters, they are expected to develop stronger affinity with the media outlets featuring the character and a stronger hedonic enjoyment and greater suspense.

Intensification

According to Knapp's model, the relationship is cemented at the intensification stage. Both parties view each other as a friend, are committed to each other, and engage in mutual meaningful disclosure. In the PSRs, media users seek intimacy with the media figure as they intensify and maintain their relationship with him/her, falling within stable dyadic patterns (e.g., turning to the character for encouragement or amusement) based on previously acquired certainty about the figure. On a *cognitive* level, the PSR extends beyond the context of media exposure as viewers think more often about the media figure during the day-to-day life, a variation on the imagined interactions that are a part of interpersonal relationships with friends (e.g., through internal dialogues; Madison & Porter, 2015). On the *affective* level, viewers develop stronger feelings towards the character, including friend-like or parental feelings towards the figure (Stever, 2009). On a *behavioral* level, the PSR can manifest in re-watching the media content, seeking additional context in seeking deeper media encounters (e.g., "behind the scenes," following the media figure on social media) and discussing the media figures with others.

Predictors of intensification.

Audience variables. Some viewers may be more prone to developing intense PSR as a function of a general inclination to seek closeness with others. Specifically, attachment style refers to individual's working models of others and relationships. Research consistently demonstrates that individuals who are comfortable with intimacy (secure) and particularly those who strive for intimacy (anxious-preoccupied), score higher on PSR measures compared with those with avoidant attachment style (J.Cohen, 1997; Cole & Leets, 1999; Rosaen & Dibble, 2016, 2017). Individuals with preoccupied attachment have strong desire for relationships but a low sense of one's own worthiness to be loved (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). It makes sense that craving a relationship but fearing rejection would encourage PSA ("I love Michael Jackson and he'll never leave me," Stever, 2009).

PSI variables. PSIs at the experimentation stage predict whether individuals continue to intensification. First, media figures' *self-disclosure* and *perceived reciprocity* can promote PSRs. This can include, for example, disclosure of personal information about a fictional character within the narrative world, interviews, or social media posts. Specifically, social media enables media figures to interact with fans directly and many celebrities indeed do so (Stever & Lawson, 2013). In turn, celebrity's divulging personal information on social media fosters PSRs (Kim & Song, 2016; Stever & Lawson, 2013) in the same way self-disclosure functions in the intensification of face-to-face relationships. Moreover, social media fortifies the illusion of reciprocity and interactivity (Bond, 2016) even when there is almost no true exchange between the celebrity and the fan (Stever & Lawson, 2013). Thus, the authenticity of the interaction is not as important as the *perceived* authenticity (E. Cohen & Tyler, 2016). Even if someone else interacts on behalf of the celebrity, the interaction illusion will have an effect so long as the

messages are perceived to be genuine. This can explain why although reciprocity is mostly relevant to celebrities rather than fictional characters, some fans enjoy playful interactions on social media with profiles of fictional characters (Wood & Baughman, 2012).

One aspect of PSIs that can hinder PSRs is ***expectancy violation.*** At the experimentation stage, individuals validated the consistency of the figure and developed solid expectation from him/her. As with interpersonal relationships, information that disconfirms a positive expectation can be detrimental to the relationship (Afifi & Metts, 1998). When celebrities misbehave (e.g., sex scandal), the specific domain of the transgression and the type of media figure determine the extent to which intensification is inhibited. For instance, specific sets of expectancies associated with athletes versus news anchors make certain behaviors more reprehensible in the context of one type of celebrities but not others (E. Cohen, 2010). Importantly, media users do not strictly maintain distinctions between actors and the fictional characters they portray (Tukachinsky, 2015). Thus, for PSRs with actors or fictional characters, both information about the actor and the character are important in impression formation (Tal-Or & Papirman, 2007).

Intensification effects. In addition to effects that have been already observed at earlier stages of the PSR (e.g., attention, retention, enjoyment), additional effects are anticipated at the intensification stage as media consumers form close relationships based on trust and a sense of intimacy. Only at this stage the predicted effect of PSR on reduced counter-arguing (Moyer-Gusé, 2008) is expected to occur. Consequently, viewers are more likely to rely on the character to enhance their sense of self-efficacy, which in turn would further boost persuasion and modeling effects or promote a positive parasocial contact to reduce stereotypes and improve attitudes towards marginalized groups.

To illustrate, on average, studies published between 1990 and 2011 did not find a significant relationship between PSR and persuasive outcomes (Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013). However, recent studies seem to demonstrate such effects. This shift can be, at least in part, attributed to a change in the measurement. Earlier studies employed Rubin's et al. (1985) PSI scale that captures phenomena that occur on nearly all stages of PSRs. Conversely, later studies employed measures that have a greater representation of items that capture the intensification stage of PSRs. For example, Rasmussen and Ewoldsen (2016) find that PSR with the television psychologist Dr. Phil (measured as a sense of trust and intimacy using Tukachinsky's [2011] scale) increases viewers' self-efficacy and intention to treat mental illness. Similarly, using a subset of items from Rubin (1985) and Bocarnea and Brown's (2006) scales that specifically tap into the deeper affective bond, Hoffner and Cohen (2017) found effects of PSR with a media persona with mental illness. Arguably, only the deep sense of relationship that formed between the viewers on the intensification level of the PSR enables such effect to occur.

Integration/Bonding

The integration stage in Knapp's model involves a sense of "oneness" and "fusion of personalities" (Welch & Rubin, 2002, p. 29) as the relationship partners share their identity. Individuals create a shared social identity and celebrate their relationship by exchanging tokens of their affection, and spending most of their time together. At this stage, individuals feel that they share a very special relationship of trust and complete understanding. Others recognize the dyad's commitment to each other. This social recognition is fully achieved at the following stage, bonding, through initialization and ceremonies (e.g., marriage).

In the same way, in PSRs, at the integration stage, media users' sense of self becomes more intertwined with the media figure, developing a deeper relationship that is socially

recognized. Individuals blur the line between themselves and the objects of their fandom (Sandvoss, 2005). Bonding in Knapp's sense is unlikely in the parasocial context since there is no parasocial equivalent of marriage (with rare exceptions, such as a gamer who allegedly married an anime character in a virtual-reality; Lah, 2009). Nonetheless, the underlying processes of integration and bonding -- developing commitment, social recognition, and identity interconnectedness -- do occur in many media users and can be manifested in a variety of ways.

On a *cognitive* level, PSR serves identity needs, as individuals see fandom as an aspect of their personal identity. The PSR assists individuals in solidifying and asserting their autonomy as a unique and independent individual. Not surprisingly, therefore, intense PSRs are particularly common in adolescence as a function of their level of emotional autonomy from their parents (Giles & Maltby, 2004). However, in adults too, integration with celebrities is associated with autonomy need-gratifications (Thomson, 2006). This identity is recognized and reinforced socially by being regarded as a fan by others. For example, one fan recounted that her students playfully referred to Josh Groban as "her boyfriend" (author interview). On a behavioral level, the parasocial relational status is recognized through attending conventions and socializing with like-minded individuals, participating in rituals, being invested in collecting memorabilia, publishing fanfiction, and obtaining autographs and selfies (e.g., Shipley, 2015). On cognitive and emotional dimensions, individuals might feel distant from individuals who oppose the media figure. All of these provide a social validation of the relational status of the fan as engaged in a PSR with a media figure.

On the *emotional* level, individuals develop deep intimacy with the character and feel a "special" bond. Josh Groban fans, for example, recounted that in an early-career interview Groban said "I am theirs and they are mine," which fans experienced as validation of their bond

(Author interview). Individuals form parasocial attachments (PSA) by finding comfort or "safe haven" in the media persona's work, particularly in times of hardship or for self-soothing (Stever, 2013).

Behavioral manifestations involve spending a great amount of time on PSR-related activities (Duffett, 2013). Transmedia storytelling affords greater opportunities for integration of PSR, for instance through fan fiction (Verba, 2013), or by impersonating fictional characters on social media (Wood & Baughman, 2012).

As the PSR-target is integrated with one's identity, individuals can changes themselves in nuanced ways, like unconscious linguistic synchronization and mimicry (Goode & Robinson, 2013) or, in extreme cases, even surgically altering their appearance to emulate their idol (Holmes & Redmond, 2006). Importantly, although some of these behaviors have been criticized in the past as pathological (McCutcheon, Ashe, Houran, & Maltby, 2003) PSR integration is not inherently maladaptive. Only a small fraction of individuals engage in dysfunctional PSRs (likely due to an underlying mental health issue) while most media users maintain healthy lives enriched by the PSR (Stever, 2011a).

Integration predictors.

Audience variables. Given that the primary goal of this stage involves identity integration, it is logical to assume that *identity needs* would foster advancing the PSR to this stage. Indeed, deeper PSRs were found to be positively associated with a high sense of autonomy, assisting to solidify young individuals in their emerging identity (Giles & Maltby, 2004). Although identity development needs are particularly central to PSR in adolescence, processes underlying identity formation continue to drive integration in PSR into adulthood as well (Stever, 2009). To a large extent, in adults as well, fandom is driven by a motivation to feel

meaningfulness, personal growth, fulfillment (Chadborn, Edwards, & Reysen, 2017), and increased self-understanding (Madison & Porter, 2015).

Media user's ***personality*** serves as the best predictor of integration (Stever, 1995) as it reflects the capacity and motivation to engage in imaginative relationships. Deriving from Jung, Myer-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI, Myers & Myers, 2010) evaluates personality on four dimensions. One dimension is sensation-intuition. Individuals with intuitive personality tend to base decisions on impressions and fantasy rather than physical experiences. On the other end of the continuum, individuals with sensing personality base decisions on facts and observations. Intuitive personality was correlated with propensity for daydreaming, and vivid fantasy (Gow, Lang, & Chant, 2004; Robertson & Gow, 1999). Since intensification of PSRs entails maintaining a relationship in one's imagination, individuals with intuitive personality are expected to be more capable of advancing to this relational stage. Indeed, research found that intuitive personality is consistently over-represented by a factor of two in behaviorally identified committed fan samples compared to general population samples (Stever, 1995). However, this effect was not observed among less committed fans (McCarley & Escoto, 2003) in line with the current theorization that intuitive-personality plays a particularly important role in integration and is not as critical on earlier stages of the PSR.

Additionally, according to the deficiency paradigm (Tsao, 1996) lonely individuals use media as an opportunity to form PSRs as ***compensation*** for inadequate social relationships. However, research on PSRs and loneliness yields very inconsistent support for this hypothesis (e.g., Rubin et al., 1985; Wang, et al., 2008). In part, this can be explained by use of chronic rather than situational loneliness measures and assessing PSR as a whole rather than capturing the PSR integration where compensation is argued to take place.

A closer examination of the literature suggests that viewers who are consistently lonely are not more likely to engage in PSRs. Rather, those who feel lonely only some of the time, in certain situations, missing a particular person, or experiencing a temporary deficit in certain types of relationships also report greater PSR in contexts that fulfill the particular loss. Thus, integration stages of PSR can be instrumental for particular individuals. For example, although loneliness was not correlated with PSR in heterosexual adolescents, loneliness was positively associated with PSR among LGBT teens, particularly those who lacked LGBT friends among their peers (Bond, 2018). In samples of adults, effects were found when considering specific aspects of PSR. For example, romantic loneliness, particularly in women, was found related to overall PSRs intensity (Wang et al., 2008). Moreover, intimacy with opposite-sex media figures (rather than PSRs overall) was found to be significantly higher for heterosexual single viewers than those in a romantic relationship (Greenwood & Long, 2011). Finally, deeper (but not casual) PSRs were positively associated with lack of closeness and secure relationships in adolescents (Giles & Maltby, 2004).

PSI variables. The frequency and quality of interaction at the intensification stage are likely to facilitate integration. These include the duration of the PSR (Eyal & Cohen, 2006) and frequency of exposure (Tian & Yoo, 2015). Additionally, celebrities' self-disclosure of personal information in interviews and social media is thought to create a sense of intimacy and immediacy, enhancing PSRs (Kim & Song, 2016).

Integration effects. Integration affects media users' self-concept and responses to media, including media effects.

Self-concept. As viewers' identity becomes intertwined with that of the media figure, the media persona can have great impact on the viewers' self-concept, mood, and identity. This

effect can be functional, by enhancing the viewers' psychological well-being and shielding them from psychological threats. Specifically, exposure to a target of PSR can make people feel closer to their ideal self and make people with low self-esteem feel better (Derrick et al., 2008), and protect from feeling of rejection and loneliness (Derrick et al., 2009). On this level of closeness, as viewers psychologically merge with the media figure, they are also less likely to experience contrast effect that could threaten their sense of self. For example, extremely high levels of PSR buffer effects of body image threats in both men and women (Young, Gabriel, & Hollar, 2013; Young, Gabriel, & Sechrist, 2012). The "presence" of a character with whom people experience high PSR can facilitate learning and performance (Gardner & Knowles 2008; Gola et al., 2013).

Perceptions of the media figure. Deep engagement with a media figure can influence the viewers' interpretation and subjective understanding of that persona. In interpersonal relationships individuals are more accurate at assessing and deducing the personality, thoughts, and feelings of a friend compared to a stranger (Barrick, Patton, & Haugland, 2000; Stinson & Ickes, 1992). Nonetheless, when a person integrates his or her friend into his/her own self-concept, judgments of the friend will be subjected to various ego-defensive biases. For instance, individuals make more favorable attribution of a friend's behaviors and exhibit greater optimistic bias in estimating their friend's future (e.g., Regan, Snyder, & Kassin, 1995; Tesser & Campbell, 1982).

In the same way, PSR at the integration stage can promote more favorable interpretation of the media figure. For example, fans judge their favorite celebrity as more generous, honest, wise, courageous and helpful compared to non-fans (Stever, 1991). Thus, it is also possible that celebrity transgression (e.g., a sex scandal or criminal investigation) that would have caused PSR termination on initiation and experimentation stages would be more tolerated at this point as

viewers are inclined to make more favorable and forgiving attributions (Um, 2013). For instance, those who were psychologically involved with O.J. Simpson were more likely to believe in his innocence in spite of any evidence to the contrary (Brown et al., 1997). As viewers are more invested in the relationship, from a social exchange perspective, the cost of termination of the relationships are higher, and thus dismissal or rationalization of a misbehavior would be self-preserving. However, when the moral transgression is too serious to be rationalized or dismissed, the media users undergo a more painful and intense parasocial breakup because it involves deeper levels of self (Hu, 2016).

In a similar vein, recent research suggests that PSR can trump political judgment. Individuals who established a PSR with Donald Trump watching his appearances on a reality show were more likely to support him when he turned to politics (Gabriel, Paravati, Green, & Flomsbee, 2018). In fact, the effect of PSR was particularly strong for those who did not affiliate with his party and thus would normally be considered as the least likely Trump voters.

Conclusions

The model proposed here integrates research and theory from a variety of perspectives offering implications for measurement and research design, and provokes new research questions. The model conceptualizes PSR as a dynamic process that evolves through a series of stages offering an alternative to the view of PSR as a monolithic construct varying only in its intensity. It is suggested here that each stage of PSR has its unique manifestations and consequences. By operationalizing each stage and identifying antecedents and outcomes of each stage, the model offers testable predictions. The predictors for each PSR stage can be used as independent variables hypothesized to predict PSR as operationalized for that stage. As

discussed above, this approach has the potential to reconcile some inconsistent findings in the PSR literature, such as in the domain of loneliness and media effects.

The model offers several implications for research. First, researchers should be more careful in defining the PSR-stage relevant to their particular study. The vast majority of survey-based studies ask participants about his or her "favorite" character, which could correspond to more than one PSR stage. Similarly, experiments involving stimuli featuring familiar actors or celebrities assume pre-existing PSR, however participants are likely to vary in their specific relational stage. Researchers should fine-tune their hypotheses, considering the particular PSR stage that is appropriate for the outcomes examined in a given study.

Second, despite the important strides made towards development of better measures of PSR and PSI, it appears that there is room for capturing additional nuances of the PSR at each stage. If each stage varies not merely in intensity but also in its goals and PSI manifestations, a more complete measure would account for these specific aspects of PSR at each stage. Empirical research should further develop and validate such measures (Appendix A offers suggestions based on existing measures).

Third, conceptualizing PSR as an evolving experience argues for longitudinal data to assess PSR's progression. For example, the model suggests that perceived character attractiveness and homophily will shift over time as a function of the relational stage.

Limitations

Two main questions lie outside the scope of the current model. The current theorization only applies to positive PSRs; however, at times individuals also develop negative PSRs (Hartmann, 2008). Viewers display negative PSIs with disliked characters (e.g., yelling at the character; Dibble & Rosaen, 2011) and can engage in seemingly long lasting negative PSRs

(e.g., wearing an "I hate J.R." pin, referring to the soap opera villain*;* Ang, 1985). These are not fully accounted for by this model. At the initiation and experimentation stages individuals would form a negative impression of, and reach certainty about, their dislike towards the character. While some individuals may terminate their relationship with the media figure, others may continue enjoying watching or indulge in celebrity gossip featuring a media figure they despise. From the scarce research on this phenomenon, negative PSRs appear to be fundamentally different from positive PSRs (Rosaen & Dibble, 2016), and thus extend beyond the scope of the present model.

Second, the current model focused on the equivalents of Knapp's stages of "coming together." It is interesting to consider whether theorization of parasocial breakup (PSB) can also benefit from this approach. For instance, most children's PSBs result from outgrowing the PSR or habituating from overexposure (Bond & Calvert, 2014). Such PSBs may follow patterns similar to those characterizing interpersonal relationship dissolutions. Unfortunately, however, until today, most research focused on PSB resulting from death of the PSR-target or a cancellation of the show (e.g., Cohen & Hoffner, 2016; Eyal & Cohen, 2006). Further theorization and research on PSR-dissolution are due.

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Appendix A

Supplemental online materials available at:

https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/comm_articles/53/