

# Parasocial Relationships in The Digital Age: Influencer Culture And Well-Being

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## Abstract

The proliferation of social media influencers has transformed the landscape of parasocial relationships, creating unprecedented opportunities for one-sided emotional connections between content creators and audiences. This paper examines the complex interplay between influencer culture, parasocial relationship formation, and psychological well-being outcomes, with particular focus on loneliness and life satisfaction. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from media psychology and social connection research, this review synthesizes empirical evidence demonstrating that parasocial relationships in digital contexts exhibit unique characteristics compared to traditional media, including perceived interactivity, accessibility, and authenticity. While parasocial bonds with influencers can provide social surrogacy and emotional support for some individuals, emerging research suggests potential risks including increased loneliness, social comparison distress, and diminished real-world relationship quality. The intensity of parasocial investment, baseline social support, and individual differences in attachment patterns appear to moderate these effects. Implications for mental health practitioners, platform designers, and future research directions are discussed, emphasizing the need for nuanced understanding of when and for whom parasocial relationships serve adaptive versus maladaptive functions.

**Keywords:** - Parasocial Relationships, Influencer Culture, Loneliness, Well-Being, Social Media, Digital Communication

## I. INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution has fundamentally altered the nature of human social connection, creating novel forms of mediated relationships that challenge traditional conceptualizations of interpersonal bonds. Among the most significant developments is the rise of social media influencers—individuals who cultivate large online followings and engage audiences through carefully curated content across platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. These digital personalities have become central figures in the lives of millions, particularly younger demographics, fostering parasocial relationships characterized by one-sided emotional investment and perceived intimacy (Chung & Cho, 2017; Lou & Kim, 2019).

Parasocial relationships, first conceptualized by Horton and Wohl (1956) in the context of television viewership, refer to the illusion of reciprocal interaction that audience members experience with media figures despite the absence of actual two-way communication. In the contemporary digital landscape, these relationships have evolved beyond passive consumption to include interactive elements such as comments, direct messages, and livestream participation, blurring the boundaries between mediated and genuine interpersonal connection (Dibble et al., 2016). The algorithmic personalization of content delivery and the intimate, authentic presentation style adopted by many influencers intensify feelings of personal connection and emotional investment among followers.

Understanding the psychological implications of these digitally-mediated parasocial bonds has become increasingly urgent as concerns mount regarding rising loneliness rates and declining mental health, particularly among adolescents and young adults (Twenge et al., 2018). While some research suggests that parasocial relationships can serve beneficial functions—providing companionship, entertainment, and emotional support—other evidence points to potential risks, including social comparison distress, unrealistic relationship expectations, and displacement of authentic social connection (Bond, 2016; Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009).

This paper provides a comprehensive theoretical and empirical examination of parasocial relationships in the digital age, with specific focus on the impact of influencer culture on loneliness and psychological well-being. By synthesizing contemporary research across media psychology, communication studies, and clinical psychology, this review aims to clarify the conditions under which parasocial bonds serve adaptive versus maladaptive functions and to identify critical moderating factors that shape individual outcomes.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Parasocial Interaction Theory

The foundational framework for understanding mediated pseudo-relationships derives from Horton and Wohl's (1956) parasocial interaction theory, which posited that media consumers develop quasi-social relationships with television personalities through repeated exposure and the illusion of face-to-face interaction. These parasocial bonds, though unidirectional, mirror genuine friendships in their capacity to provide companionship, emotional engagement, and perceived understanding. Rubin and Step (2000) extended this framework by distinguishing between parasocial interaction—the immediate, situational experience of engagement during media consumption—and parasocial relationships, which represent enduring bonds that persist beyond individual viewing episodes.

Contemporary refinements by Dibble et al. (2016) emphasize the cognitive and affective dimensions of parasocial phenomena, highlighting how audience members construct mental representations of media figures, attribute personalities and intentions to them, and experience genuine emotional responses to their perceived successes and failures. This theoretical elaboration proves particularly relevant for understanding influencer-follower dynamics, where the cultivation of authenticity and accessibility creates especially potent conditions for parasocial bond formation.

### 2.2. Social Surrogacy Hypothesis

The social surrogacy hypothesis proposed by Derrick et al. (2009) provides a complementary framework for understanding the functional significance of parasocial relationships. This perspective suggests that parasocial bonds can temporarily satisfy fundamental needs for belonging and social connection when real-world relationships are unavailable or insufficient. Favorite television programs, and by extension social media influencers, serve as psychological surrogates that buffer against feelings of loneliness and social disconnection. However, this framework raises critical questions about whether such substitution represents adaptive coping or problematic displacement of authentic relationship-seeking behavior.

### 2.3. Loneliness and Social Connection Framework

Cacioppo and Hawkey's (2009) model of loneliness conceptualizes social isolation as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing subjective feelings of disconnection, cognitive biases toward social threat, and physiological stress responses. According to this framework, chronic loneliness results not merely from objective social isolation but from perceived discrepancies between desired and actual relationship quality. This distinction proves crucial for evaluating parasocial relationships, as the question becomes whether perceived connection with influencers reduces subjective loneliness or merely provides illusory compensation that masks underlying relationship deficits.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

### 3.1. Characteristics of Digital Parasocial Relationships

Research demonstrates that parasocial relationships in digital environments exhibit distinctive features compared to traditional broadcast media contexts. Bond (2016) found that social media platforms intensify parasocial bond strength among adolescents through mechanisms of perceived interactivity, personalization, and continuous availability. Unlike television personalities who appear at scheduled times, influencers maintain constant digital presence through stories, posts, and real-time updates, creating an illusion of ongoing relationship maintenance. The interactive affordances of social media—commenting, liking, sharing—further reinforce perceptions of reciprocal connection, even though the communication remains fundamentally asymmetrical.

Chung and Cho (2017) identified authenticity as a crucial factor distinguishing influencer-follower relationships from traditional celebrity parasocial bonds. Influencers who disclose personal struggles, share everyday experiences, and present less polished, more relatable content cultivate stronger parasocial connections. This perceived authenticity creates feelings of intimacy and trust that can rival real-world friendships in emotional intensity, despite the absence of genuine reciprocity. Lou and Kim (2019) demonstrated that among adolescents, influencer credibility and authenticity significantly predict parasocial relationship strength, which in turn mediates effects on consumer behavior and identity formation.

### 3.2. Parasocial Relationships and Loneliness: Mixed Evidence

The relationship between parasocial bonds and loneliness appears complex and potentially bidirectional. Derrick et al.'s (2009) experimental research provided initial evidence for the social surrogacy function, demonstrating that exposure to favorite television programs reduced feelings of loneliness and rejection following social exclusion. This suggests that parasocial relationships can serve as temporary buffers against social pain. However, subsequent research examining social media influencers has yielded more mixed findings.

Some evidence suggests that individuals with deficient offline social networks may be particularly drawn to forming intense parasocial bonds as compensatory mechanisms. However, longitudinal research by Twenge et al. (2018) linked increased social media use and screen time to rising rates of loneliness, depression, and suicidal ideation among adolescents,

suggesting that digital engagement may displace rather than supplement authentic relationship formation. The critical question remains whether parasocial investment represents a symptom of existing loneliness or a contributing cause.

### 3.3. Well-Being Outcomes: Conditional Effects

Research examining psychological well-being outcomes presents a similarly nuanced picture. While some individuals report deriving inspiration, entertainment, and sense of community from influencer followings, others experience negative effects including social comparison distress, envy, and reduced life satisfaction. The intensity of parasocial investment appears to moderate these outcomes, with excessive emotional dependence on influencers predicting poorer mental health indices. Additionally, baseline levels of social support, attachment security, and individual differences in social comparison tendencies likely influence whether parasocial relationships serve beneficial or detrimental functions for well-being.

### 3.4. Summary of Key Research Findings

Table 1. synthesizes major empirical findings regarding parasocial relationships in digital contexts and their Associations with loneliness and well-being outcomes.

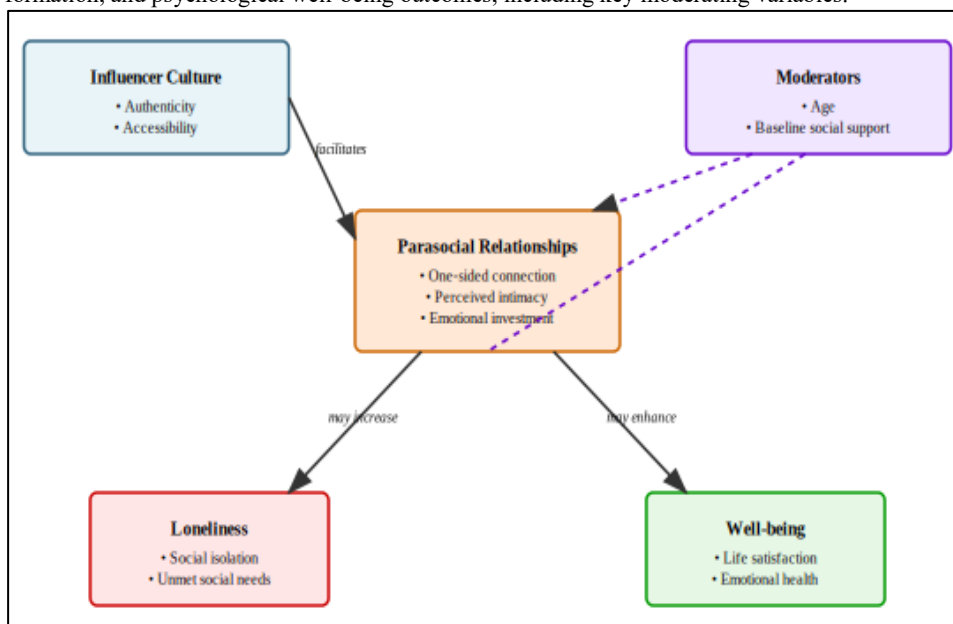
Study	Focus	Key Finding	Implications
Bond (2016)	Social media and adolescent parasocial relationships	Platform interactivity strengthens parasocial bonds	Digital affordances intensify relationship formation
Chung & Cho (2017)	Influencer authenticity and parasocial connection	Perceived authenticity predicts relationship strength	Authentic self-disclosure cultivates intimacy
Derrick et al. (2009)	Social surrogacy function of favorite programs	Parasocial relationships reduce post-exclusion loneliness	Can serve adaptive buffering function
Twenge et al. (2018)	Digital media and adolescent mental health	Screen time linked to increased depression and loneliness	Digital engagement may displace real relationships
Lou & Kim (2019)	Influencer credibility and adolescent outcomes	Parasocial bonds mediate behavioral and identity effects	Influences extend beyond consumption to self-concept

Note. This table synthesizes selected key findings from major empirical studies examining parasocial relationships in digital contexts

### 3.5. Integrated Theoretical Model

Figure 1 presents an integrated theoretical model synthesizing the reviewed literature on influencer culture, parasocial relationships, and well-being outcomes. The model illustrates key pathways and moderating factors that determine whether parasocial bonds serve beneficial or detrimental functions.

Fig 1. Theoretical model depicting relationships between influencer culture, parasocial relationship formation, and psychological well-being outcomes, including key moderating variables.



## IV. CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. The Paradox of Connection and Isolation

A central tension emerges from the reviewed literature regarding whether parasocial relationships with influencers represent genuine social connection or illusory substitution that exacerbates isolation. The social surrogacy research suggests that mediated relationships can fulfill belonging needs and reduce momentary loneliness, yet longitudinal evidence linking heavy social media use to declining mental health raises questions about long-term consequences. The critical distinction may lie in whether parasocial engagement supplements or displaces real-world relationship investment.

For individuals with adequate offline social networks, parasocial relationships with influencers may serve benign entertainment and inspiration functions without compromising authentic connection. However, for those experiencing social isolation or relationship difficulties, intensive parasocial investment may provide temporary comfort while simultaneously reducing motivation to address underlying social skill deficits or environmental barriers to connection. The one-sided nature of influencer relationships—lacking genuine reciprocity, mutual support, and accountability—ultimately cannot fulfill core relational needs for intimacy, validation, and collaborative problem-solving.

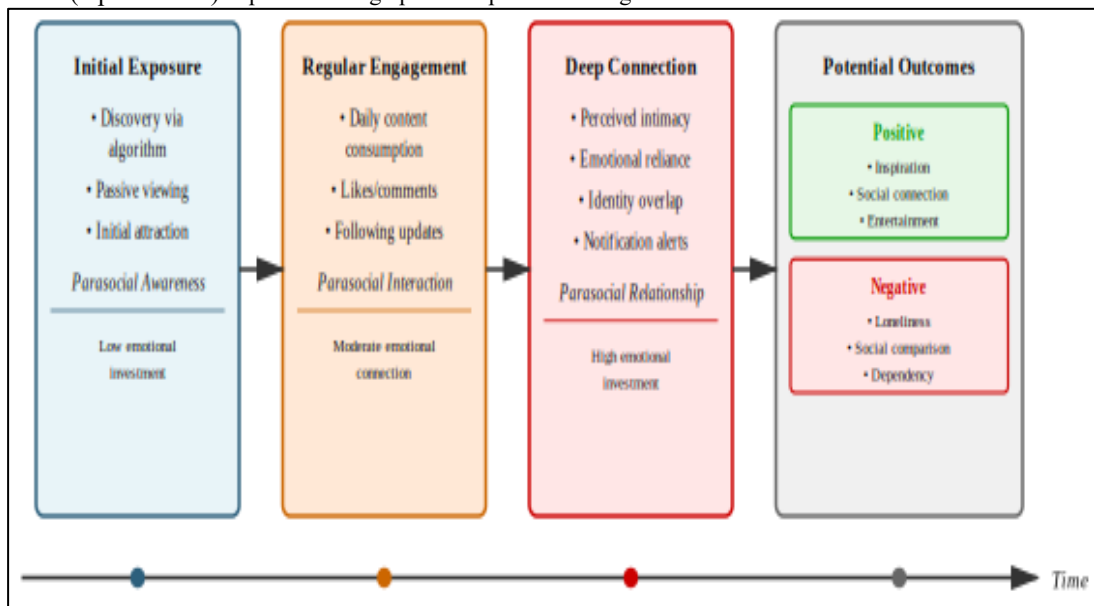
### 4.2. Developmental Considerations

Age and developmental stage appear to critically moderate parasocial relationship effects. Adolescents and emerging adults, still forming identity and relationship schemas, may be particularly vulnerable to conflating parasocial bonds with authentic friendship. The perceived intimacy of influencer self-disclosure can create unrealistic expectations for real-world relationships, where reciprocity requires vulnerability, conflict navigation, and emotional regulation. Additionally, the curated, idealized presentations typical of influencer content may distort social comparison processes and contribute to diminished self-worth and life satisfaction during developmentally sensitive periods.

### 4.3. Temporal Dynamics and Relationship Evolution

Current research largely employs cross-sectional designs that cannot establish temporal precedence or track relationship trajectories over time. Longitudinal research is needed to examine whether parasocial bond intensity follows predictable developmental patterns, under what conditions individuals naturally disengage from parasocial relationships, and whether the quality of offline social networks moderates parasocial relationship stability. Figure 2 presents a proposed model of parasocial relationship development stages in digital contexts, highlighting critical transition points where individuals may experience either positive or negative outcomes.

Fig 2. Proposed stages of parasocial relationship development in digital contexts, from initial (April – June) exposure through potential positive or negative outcomes.



Note: Progression through stages varies by individual and may not be linear

## V. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

### 5.1. Clinical and Applied Implications

Mental health practitioners should assess clients' parasocial relationship patterns, particularly among adolescents and young adults presenting with loneliness, social anxiety, or depression. Screening questions might explore time invested in following influencers, emotional responses to influencer content, and whether digital engagement displaces real-world social opportunities. Interventions could target cognitive distortions around parasocial intimacy, encourage balanced media consumption habits, and facilitate offline relationship skill development.

Platform designers and policymakers should consider features that promote healthy parasocial engagement while mitigating risks. This might include usage monitoring tools, prompts encouraging real-world social connection, and content

moderation policies that discourage exploitative authenticity performances designed to maximize parasocial attachment. Additionally, media literacy programs should educate young people about parasocial relationship dynamics, helping them critically evaluate influencer content and maintain realistic expectations for digital versus authentic relationships.

## 5.2. Research Directions

Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs tracking parasocial relationship development, offline social network quality, and mental health outcomes over extended periods. Experimental studies could manipulate influencer authenticity, interactivity levels, and content types to identify specific mechanisms driving beneficial versus harmful effects. Individual difference research should examine whether attachment styles, social comparison tendencies, and baseline loneliness moderate parasocial relationship formation and consequences.

Additionally, research should examine cultural and contextual factors that may shape parasocial relationship norms and effects. Collectivist versus individualist cultural values, socioeconomic factors affecting offline social opportunity, and variation across different platform affordances and influencer types all warrant systematic investigation. Finally, intervention research evaluating programs designed to promote healthy parasocial engagement or reduce problematic patterns would provide crucial evidence for applied practice.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Parasocial relationships with social media influencers represent a ubiquitous yet incompletely understood phenomenon with significant implications for psychological well-being in the digital age. The reviewed evidence reveals a complex picture in which these one-sided bonds can serve both adaptive and maladaptive functions depending on individual characteristics, relationship context, and intensity of investment. While parasocial connections may provide temporary companionship and inspiration for some individuals, excessive dependence on influencer relationships risks displacing authentic social connection and exacerbating loneliness.

The unique affordances of digital platforms—continuous availability, perceived interactivity, and cultivated authenticity—create especially potent conditions for parasocial bond formation that differ qualitatively from traditional broadcast media contexts. Understanding when and for whom these relationships promote versus undermine well-being requires attending to developmental stage, baseline social support, and individual differences in attachment and social comparison processes.

As influencer culture continues to evolve and permeate daily life, particularly for younger generations, the imperative grows for rigorous research examining parasocial relationship mechanisms, trajectories, and outcomes. Such knowledge can inform clinical practice, platform design, and media literacy efforts aimed at helping individuals navigate the digital social landscape in ways that support rather than undermine authentic human connection and psychological flourishing.

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