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## Parasocial Relationships with Online Influencers

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# PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH ONLINE INFLUENCERS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Mass Communication

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by  
Sydney Mechelle Reynolds  
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## Abstract

Current research on parasocial relationships has a focus on the media consumer and the media personae in television or film where the media consumer exerts time and emotional energy into the relationship while the character is unaware of their existence. The purpose of this study is to explore the Influencers and further conceptualize the term parasocial relationship to include these online mediated relationships and interactions. This study explores parasocial relationships and what is associated with them in the context of social media with respondents who consistently engage with social media Influencers. Social media Influencers address their audiences personally and share content that entices people to continue following or interacting with them. This mutual awareness between the social media Influencer and the media consumer strengthens the parasocial relationship. I hypothesize that people who consistently engage with specific social media Influencers will report positive associations between parasocial relationships, homophily, identification and wishful identification with the Influencer. The possibility and amount of interaction between the Influencer and the individual would also entice people to engage with the Influencer more frequently.

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

Much of the literature and research on parasocial relationships has focused mainly on the interactions and levels of involvement measured from individuals and TV characters or television-mediated persona. This study explores what is associated with parasocial relationships with influencers as well as further conceptualize the term 'parasocial relationship' to include these online mediated relationships or interactions. For this study, a social media influencer will be defined as an individual who uses social media to garner a large yet niche audience which they interact across multiple social media platforms (Kirwan, 2021). There are several types of Influencers on social media, including models, make-up artists, chefs, dancers, comedians, family vloggers, etc. These Influencers can have anywhere from hundreds of followers to millions. Influencers with smaller audiences are more likely to interact with their non-verified followers than those with hundreds of thousands to millions of followers.

Social media use surged in popularity starting in the 2000s. As of 2019, 2.26 billion people use Facebook, 1.90 billion use YouTube, 500 million use TikTok, and 329.5 million use Twitter (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). The rise in social media in wealthier countries has also led to increased time spent on these sites. People with large followings on social networking websites have leveraged their audience for monetary gain in recent years. Social media Influencers earn their income through affiliate marketing, sponsorships, and brand deals, pay per post/pay per click programs from the social networking site, as well as by promoting their own products or businesses. The monetization of an individual's social media posts varies across platforms (Schaffer, 2022).

In this age of online influencers, everyday social media users can interact with these "celebrities." Parasocial relationships initially include relationships between the media viewer and the media performer who is unaware of the viewer's explicit existence. Thus, having online

interactions or relationships with media personae does not necessarily mean the "media performer" knows the media viewer. Individuals may also form these parasocial relationships for different reasons, just as they use various media outlets to achieve a specific goal. Ruggiero (2017) explains that the variability of audience involvement with media is dependent on how much the user relies on it. From talking about the latest episode of your favorite TV show to keeping up with daily worldwide news, the Internet allows people to interact with others in ways they may not have in-person (Ruggiero, 2017). The interpersonal aspects of the Internet make it fascinating to explore how individuals use social media and inadvertently create parasocial relationships with media personae and what outcomes these relationships have.

Using parasocial relationship, homophily, engagement, and identification measures, this study explores parasocial relationships in the context of social media. The possibility and amount of interaction between the Influencer and the individual would also entice people to engage with the Influencer more frequently. Interaction in media effects accounts for the growing interest of the media consumer in the media content (Nordlund 1978). Social media Influencers address their audiences personally and share content that entices people to continue following or interacting with them. This mutual awareness between the social media Influencer and the media consumer strengthens the parasocial relationship.



## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

### **Parasocial Relationships and Parasocial Interaction**

Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced the concept of parasocial interaction in communication studies. They explained that parasocial relationships take place between the media consumer and the media performers. Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships or interactions between the media viewer and the media personae or character involved. The media viewer exerts time, effort, and emotional energy into this relationship while the character in question has no idea they exist. Parasocial interaction revolves around the interpersonal involvement of the media user with what they are consuming (Perse & Rubin, 1989). The viewers involvement then enhances the parasocial interaction. Parasocial relationships are long-term effects that develop during media consumption and after the initial consumption event (Brown, 2015). Perse and Rubin (1989) argue that parasocial relationships are similar to interpersonal relationships because they are voluntary, provide companionship, and are formed through social attraction. Schiappa et al. (2007) build on Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis to establish the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis. The Contact Hypothesis posits that interpersonal contact can reduce prejudice between majority and minority groups (Schiappa et al., 2005). Today's media-saturated society allows people to know others more parasocial rather than through direct interpersonal contact (Schiappa et al., 2005). In this case, parasocial interaction is seen as contact or exposure to mediated personas.

Parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions are often used interchangeably, yet the concepts' effects differ slightly. Parasocial interaction refers to the "media user's reaction to a media performer such that the media user perceives the performer as an intimate conversational partner" (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosean, 2015, p. 21). Parasocial interactions operate as a "give and take" that the media user experiences in response to exposure to media performers' actions (Horton

& Wohl, 1956, p. 215). Despite these interactions being one-sided moments giving the illusion of a real exchange, media users will perceive them as authentic. Of course, the viewer is aware that the character on the screen is not having a conversation with them directly. However, the need to escape may encourage this belief, or a suspension of disbelief that the character is addressing the viewer directly. Cummins and Chi (2014) note how mediated personae may disclose to the audience members directly to encourage connections similar to interpersonal bonds. With social media Influencers, self-disclosure from the Influencer is an important aspect of parasocial relationships (Chun & Cho, 2017). Social media Influencers display their lives and specific content to thousands, if not millions of followers, offering their audience a glimpse into the lavish or entertaining lifestyles the Influencers live. Parasocial relationships, thus, are the more enduring, long-term version of repeated and sustained interactions with the same personae. Caughey (1984) also explains that, although parasocial relationships do not necessarily include actual interpersonal interaction, they can mimic interpersonal relationships people form in real life thus producing a feeling of intimacy between the media viewer and media performer or character. However, Dibble et al. claim Horton and Wohl's initial use of the term "parasocial relationship is "ambiguous" (Dibble et al., 2015, p. 24).

Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) approach parasocial relationships by revisiting Horton and Wohl's (1956) introduction to parasocial interactions. Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) examine the media viewers' experience of parasocial interactions. They present an approach to parasocial interactions that measures the user's engagement experience with a TV performer through EPSI. Parasocial interactions with TV performers can be caused by a TV performer's addressing style, the perceived attractiveness, the viewers' perspective-taking ability, and the user's loneliness. These causes result in various outcomes, including the user's commitment to social

norms or enjoyment. Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) found a strong positive relationship between the viewers' cognitive perspective-taking ability and their parasocial experiences. The experiment also demonstrated that the viewer would feel more committed to social norms with a stronger parasocial experience and enjoy the exposure more.

Rubin, Perse, and Powel (1985) study the formation of parasocial relationships with television characters due to loneliness and likeness of the character to the media viewer. This research finds that people's unsatisfied interpersonal needs can be fulfilled through parasocial interactions. Rubin et. al's (1985) work can be applied to the modern world of parasocial relationships with social media influencers. McCourt and Fitzpatrick (2001) studied how loneliness and openness combined with elements of involvement in genuine romantic relationships can lead to the formation of parasocial relationships with television characters. Those who had higher rewards, higher costs, and fewer investments in real world romantic relationships were more involved in parasocial interactions.

Liebers and Schramm (2019) provide an overview of the current extent of parasocial research. They examine the history of parasocial phenomena research beginning with Horton and Wohl (1956). The analysis details the development of the parasocial phenomena research field, types of media characters investigated, and the methodological aspects of the current research (Liebers & Schramm 2019). Liebers and Schramm (2019) open their work with the Horton and Wohl (1956) definition of "parasocial interaction" which assumes that parasocial interaction mimics face-to-face interactions. However, parasocial interaction lacks mutuality, whereas in-person social interactions include two-way communication. The study found 261 published empirical articles about parasocial phenomena from 1956 to 2015. Research topics within this field have developed from Horton and Wohl's initial work laying the foundation for parasocial

phenomena and increased dramatically in 2014-2015 as more studies concerning social media networks were published. Overall, this field's research methods and measurements relied heavily on quantitative approaches and established or adapted scales to investigate parasocial phenomena. These widely accredited scales prove to be useful in studying the parasocial relationships with social media Influencers.

As observed by Liebers and Schramm (2019), most research on parasocial relationships has focused mainly on the interactions and involvement between individuals and TV characters or personas. The current study explores what is associated with parasocial relationships with influencers as well as further conceptualize the term 'parasocial relationship' to include these online mediated relationships. Influencers use social media to garner a large yet niche audience they interact with across multiple media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. They often interact with fans while promoting various companies and fulfilling a particular entertainment need. In this age of social media, it is easier than ever for people to connect with their favorite actor, influencer, or other online media personae. Social media can impact real-life relationships and parasocial relationships as it influences adolescents' "identity development, access to information and relationships" (Bond, 2016, p. 656).

### **Predictors of Parasocial Relationships and Parasocial Interactions**

Predictors of parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions account for the aspects of someone's media viewing experience that encourages the development of either phenomenon. Dibble et al. (2016) notes the inconsistencies with previous research defining parasocial phenomena and their predictors. McLaughlin and Wohn (2021) differentiate between parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions by comparing the predictors of both phenomena to determine what characteristics are most effective at facilitating or encouraging parasocial

relationships or parasocial interaction. Mclaughlin and Wohn (2021) outline three predictors of parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions by studying these phenomena with live streamers. These predictors include source characteristics, behavioral characteristics, viewer characteristics. The source characteristics or characteristics of the media character are the physical and social attractiveness of the media character to the media viewer (Mclaughlin & Wohn, 2021). The message source is essential to parasocial phenomena as its impact can lead to positive outcomes.

Drawing from Auter (1992), Mclaughlin and Wohn (2021) further explain that behavioral characteristics such as direct interaction with live streamers can lead to higher levels of parasocial interaction. Live streaming allows viewers to interact with the media persona through chat features. This direct interaction mimics face-to-face interaction upon which real-world relationships are built. While Mclaughlin and Wohn (2021) focused on live streamers, their research can be applied to other social networking websites and social media influencers as people can comment or directly message these figures in the hope of direct interaction. This perceived reality and intimacy of the environment created by the media persona increases the viewer's feelings of connectedness, leading to stronger parasocial relationships. Characteristics of the viewer, including feelings of loneliness, introversion, or extroversion, impact the development of parasocial phenomena. Schiappa and colleagues (2007) explain that shyness and introversion are positively related to parasocial relationships. Baek and colleagues (2013) add that social media addiction and loneliness are positively related to parasocial relationship strength, as well. Social media addiction or overuse can lead to parasocial relationship dependency (Baek et al., 2013). The positive correlation between parasocial relationship dependency and loneliness is reinforced by Baek et al. (2013).

The more social media users depend on these websites to alleviate feelings of loneliness, the more potential there is for parasocial relationships to develop.

Furthermore, viewer behavior is the third predictor of parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships. Different types of reasons for a person's loneliness will lead to varying levels of parasocial relationship strength (Wang et al., 2008). A positive correlation exists between characteristics of viewing behavior (the time spent engaging with particular media) and parasocial relationship strength (Schiappa et al., 2007). The strongest predictor of parasocial relationships is interpersonal attractiveness, whereas the strongest predictor of parasocial interaction is direct interaction (McLaughlin & Wohn, 2021). Where loneliness is positively related to parasocial relationships, it is inversely related to parasocial interaction.

Chung and Cho's (2017) research suggests self-disclosure is also a predictor of parasocial relationships. Self-disclosure refers to people sharing their hidden personal feelings and beliefs to others. Social media allows users to share and engage with content and other users they relate to the most. Self-disclosure is an important aspect of social media that is, essentially, the core of these social networking platforms. Social media's reliance on users' self-disclosure strengthens the perceived intimacy and authenticity thus fostering parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships with celebrities through social media are more "intimate, reciprocal, and interpersonal" (Chung & Cho, 2017, p. 490).

### **Effects of Parasocial Relationships and Parasocial Interactions**

Parasocial phenomena can have either positive or negative ramifications. Parasocial interactions form through a sense of mutual interaction with the media character while parasocial relationships are an ongoing feeling of intimacy between the media viewer and media content creator. Research on parasocial phenomena is mixed in its support of whether parasocial

relationships are similar to interpersonal relationships. Tukachinsky et. al (2020) demonstrates that parasocial relationships are strongly related to interpersonal bonds, involvement, and persuasive outcomes. However, Tukachinsky et. al's (2020) study also explains that the intensity of parasocial relationships is not related to social deficiencies and should not be used to as a substitution to real world relationship. Previous research demonstrates that parasocial relationships through social networking sites can lead to feelings of "loneliness, alienation, or life dissatisfaction," (Baek et al., 2013, p. 512). Baek and colleagues (2013) assert that people's engagement with parasocial relationships lead to social isolation and disengagement from the real world as mass media consumption increases. Feelings of loneliness and interpersonal distrust are impacted by media consumer's indulgence in parasocial relationships. Higher dependency on parasocial relationships to fulfill social needs is positively correlated with loneliness and interpersonal distrust (Baek et al., 2013). Parasocial relationships may also create unrealistic or unachievable relationship standards making it more difficult for someone to form real-world relationships (Derrick et. al, 2008).

While indulgence in parasocial relationships does have poor psychological effects on media viewers, there are positive outcomes from this phenomenon. Parasocial relationships can elicit a sense of belonging, motivation, and inspiration for media consumers. As mentioned by Boon and Lomore (2001), engagement in media that positively reflects the media consumer can foster motivation to engage in "prosocial activities" as represented by the media character. Parasocial relationships also have benefits for people with low self-esteem. Derrick and colleagues (2008) suggest that individuals with low self-esteem who distance themselves from real-life relationships out of fear of rejection are more likely to be attracted to someone who represents their ideal self than people of higher self-esteem. People with low self-esteem view their parasocial relationship partners as their ideal selves (Derrick et al., 2008). Parasocial relationships for people

with low self-esteem offer them a sense of belonging and serve as a substitution for something they are unable to achieve in their social life.

Parasocial interactions tends to have positive outcomes for celebrities. Chung and Cho (2017) explore the impact of parasocial interaction on celebrity endorsement effectiveness siting that parasocial interactions through social media elicits a positive impact on celebrity endorsement. People are more likely to support a brand when it is promoted by a celebrity or media figure they feel connected to through social media interactions. While this is a positive outcome for the brand, it is also beneficial to the celebrity or media figure as their fans trust for that celebrity or media figure is present. Without self-disclosure or parasocial relationships, interacting with celebrities on social media can have negative effects on consumer purchase intention if the experience is not positive (Chung & Cho, 2017).

### **Relationships with Social Media Figures**

The understanding of parasocial relationships with Influencers as focused mainly on YouTube. The concept of a “YouTube celebrity” has been explored in previous works such as Lange (2007). Lange (2007) defined the YouTube celebrity as the “site's most active and well-known users, who utilize their interactions to “influence the discourse, goals, and activities” of the platform” (Lange, 2007, p. 5). Rasmussen (2018) identifies YouTube celebrities as video creators with large followings who are seen as regular people and relatable to the audience. Ferchaud et. al (2018) offer a quantitative analysis of YouTube videos from ten most subscribed to channels on the platform to explore the relationships between content features, video attributes, and parasocial attributes that can lead to parasocial relationships between viewers and YouTube personalities. At the time, not many studies were conducting empirical examinations of YouTube “most subscribed” content creators (Lange, 2007, p. 89). Ferchaud and colleagues (2018) posit that subscribing to



channels demonstrates users desire to keep up with said content creator. These YouTube celebrities are created through the audience's enjoyment of a creator's private and public life alongside the sense of authenticity and sociability created by said YouTuber (Lange, 2007 p. 89).

Rasmussen (2018) also studied parasocial relationships between viewers and YouTube celebrities, specifically beauty vloggers, and the influence this has on viewer buying intention for products promoted or used by the beauty vlogger. Kurtin et al. (2019) applied previous research on parasocial relationships on social networking sites and online communities to YouTube. By replicating a previously established model for parasocial relationships with television characters, the study finds that when people find a YouTuber attractive, they like that creator more. Thus, the viewer attaches a greater importance to the parasocial relationship with the YouTuber. YouTube is a unique social networking environment for parasocial relationship development. Parasocial relationships are intently created by YouTubers and the platform itself facilitates this (Chen, 2014). By studying relationships after continuous interactions, Chen (2014) finds that content creators on YouTube work to form relationships with their viewers by prompting engagement with the viewers through liking and commenting on videos. Drawing on Rubin and McHugh (1987) who examine aspects of attractiveness that lead to the development of parasocial relationships, Chen (2014) also notes that social and physical attraction is positively associated with YouTube exposure.

YouTube is not the only social media website where users can form parasocial relationships with larger content creators. Paravati and Naidu (2019) dive into the effects of parasocial relationships with celebrities on Twitter and how it influences people's attitudes towards them. Are we aware that these relationships are forming, or are these bonds made unconsciously? They hypothesize that those with similar preexisting ideologies as former President Trump will form stronger parasocial relationships and increase their liking of him after viewing his tweets. These

parasocial bonds with former president Trump would only be formed with people who already like him. However, people are not aware that their attitudes are influenced by this parasocial relationship. Paravati et al. (2020) explain that parasocial relationships are a subcategory of social surrogates. Social surrogates are “social bonds with symbolic, rather than real, social targets.” They help people feel supported and connected by fulfilling specific social needs to combat loneliness, isolation, and rejection (Paravati et al., 2020). Parasocial relationships are formed and maintained between a person and a media figure through continuous exposure and the “mental stimulation process” (Paravati et al., p. 389, 2020). While people may benefit from a social surrogate, they may not even be aware they are seeking out these media figures for social benefit in the first place.

### **Identification and Wishful Identification in Mediated Relationships**

Cohen (2001) defines identification as the “mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside as if the events were happening to them” (p. 245). Identification allows media consumers to become immersed with the characters or media personae they are viewing. The audience member will put themselves in the character’s shoes as they assume “the identity of the target of our identification” (Cohen, 2001, p. 247). Throughout history, identification has been conceptualized differently by scholars as it relates to different types of media content such as print, television, film, and now, social media. For example, Bettelheim (1943) explains identification can be a media viewer having similar views as a character rather than fully immersing themselves as the media character. Identification is also important to developing one’s personal and social identities (Brown, 2015).

Brown (2015) posits that people have become attached to media personae ranging from famous actors to fictional characters. His research attempts to clarify the distinctions between

parasocial interaction and identification. Parasocial interaction is then defined as "the process of developing an imaginary relationship with a mediated persona both during and after media consumption" (Brown, 2015, p. 275). Brown clarifies Cohen's definition of identification, explaining that it is the "process of conforming to the perceived identity of a mediated persona both during and after media consumption or through participation in a mediated event" (Brown, 2015, p. 275). This definition notes that role modeling and imitation are not necessary conditions of identification and can be applied to morally ambivalent characters or antiheroes.

Moyer-Gusé (2015) provided her thoughts on Brown's (2015) new definitions. She proposes a modification to the conceptualization of identification and alternative ways to view the inner relationships presented in Brown's model. Moyer-Gusé (2015) limits the definition of identification to the processes during media exposure. They further distinguish between identification and wishful identification, including the implications for audience involvement. Wishful identification is the desire to be and behave like the media character. The media viewer may not have the same characteristics or traits as the media character but longs to emulate them. Brown's (2015) model states that parasocial interaction with characters and transportation leads to identification and worship. Moyer-Gusé (2015) disagrees with this progression and posits that identification occurs first and leads to parasocial interactions or transportation. This adjustment to Brown's (2015) model clarifies this process further.

### **Predictors of Identification with Media Personae**

Research suggests that predictors of identification with media personae include empathy, affective orientation, hopelessness, and loneliness. Chory and Cicchirillo (2005) studied the correlation between TV viewers' empathy and affective orientation with TV characters. Cohen (2001) mentions empathy as a part of identification. Media viewers that understand a character's

feelings and motivations reflects their perspective taking abilities that relates to empathy. Affective orientation is one's predisposition to actively using their emotions to guide communication (Chory & Cicchirillo, 2005). Affective orientation is considering feelings while empathy is just feeling. High affective orientation means the viewer is more sensitive to a character's emotions. Chory-Assad and Yanen (2005) also describe how hopelessness and loneliness are predictors for identification with media characters for older audiences. Hopelessness is described as a "system of cognitive schema's marked by negative expectations about the future," (Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005). The feeling of hopelessness in young adults and even older audiences can be fueled by negative depictions of their age group on television. However, when viewing media that positively represents this group, viewers report feeling motivated by their idols to engage in "prosocial activities," (Boon & Lomore, 2001). Identification with media characters or idols that positively represent this group leads to positive psychological outcomes for the viewers.

Loneliness is not only a predictor of parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships, but for identification, as well. Research suggests loneliness may be alleviated through television viewing (Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005). The viewers desire to be like the media character that has many friends can indicate loneliness (Cohen & Perse, 2003). For example, a young adult who is lonely may look to social media influencers (i.e. TikTokers, Youtubers, Instagram users) who post content of themselves and friends to combat their loneliness because their uploads depict the life the viewer wishes for.

Similar to loneliness, solitude is a predictor of identification with media characters. Solitude experiences can be positive or negative depending on the individual. Long and Averill (2003) identify nine types of solitude as they relate to self-expansion, negativity, and intimacy or

spirituality. Diversion solitude, in particular is a type of solitude where an individual spends time alone immersed in media or other activities (Long et al., 2003).

Identification with media characters may also derive from problematic media technology usage as this is linked to both feelings of loneliness and isolation (Tokunaga & Rains, 2010). Excessive internet usage serves as a form of escapism to cope with either dysfunctional emotions or to avoid real-world problems (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014).

### **Effects of Identification with Media Personae**

Sestir and Green (2010) find identification with media characters effects viewer's self-concept. While consuming media, viewers may believe they possess similar traits as media characters. Sestir and Green (2010) posit that viewers may, at least temporarily, identify with positive media characters. Identification also impacts the persuasiveness of media messages (Jih-Hsuan, 2017). Someone who has higher levels of identification with a media character or celebrity will be susceptible to retaining media messages from these sources and incorporating them into their life. The media consumer's loneliness is also remedied through identification with media characters (Greenwood & Long, 2009).

### **Homophily and Social Media**

Homophily involves comparing the media consumer and the character or media persona. Homophily is how someone is similar to those they interact with (Eyal & Rubin 2003). These similarities can include beliefs, education, social status, race, and more. People's attitudes and behaviors are essential determinants of homophily. Existing research has shown that greater degrees of homophily are associated with higher identification levels with television characters. Eyal and Rubin (2003) studied the connections between trait aggression and media viewers' homophily, identification, and parasocial relationships with these aggressive television characters.

The study finds “moderate associations” between the variables of homophily, identification, and PSI with aggressive characters (Eyal & Rubin 2003, p. 92). Turner (1993) applies interpersonal communication theories to answer what causes people to form relationships with media personalities? The interpersonal and psychological predictors of homophily and self-esteem can lead to the development of parasocial interaction (Turner, 1993). Homophily, identification, and the motives for media choice to satisfy a person’s interpersonal needs are contributors to the strength of parasocial relationships with media personae.

### **Motivations and Social Media**

The uses and gratifications theory seeks to understand why and how people engage with different media categories. This approach demonstrates that people who consume media that satisfies their needs will become more dependent on that media to continue to meet their needs (Baran, 2015). These needs may include enjoyment or fulfillment, entertainment, inducing a specific emotional response, education, awareness, escapism, and so forth. Motivation is one of the determining factors for why and when a person chooses to engage with a particular media type. Mass media can to satisfy interpersonal needs such as those for inclusion, affection, control, relaxation, escape, or enjoyment (Al-Menayes, 2015). As explained by Horton and Wohl (1956), relationships through mass media can be sometimes used as a substitute for face-to-face relationships. In conjunction with parasocial relationships, the current study also seeks what reasons people choose to engage with specific social media influencers and how they do so. Individuals may form these parasocial relationships for different reasons, just as they use various media outlets to achieve a specific goal.

Ruggiero (2017) explains that the variability of audience involvement with media is dependent on how much the user relies on it. From talking about the latest episode of your favorite

TV show to keeping up with the daily worldwide news, the Internet allows people to interact with others in ways they may not have in person (Ruggiero 2017). The interpersonal aspects of the Internet make it fascinating to explore how people use social media and inadvertently create parasocial relationships with media personae. Leung (2009) notes that the Web 2.0 allows for more user generated content over corporate media to be produced. The accessibility of Web 2.0 encourages user participation and emphasizes user control over the content that is created.

The current body of research has used the Uses and Gratifications Approach to understand how people fulfill unfulfilled interpersonal needs through mediated communication. Wang et al. (2008) dive into the feeling of loneliness and its impact on parasocial interaction between women and mediated personae. For some types of loneliness, parasocial interaction can be an adequate substitute for interpersonal interaction, while others cannot satisfy this need. The varying types of loneliness result in how women consciously or unconsciously seek parasocial interaction as a substitute to interpersonal interactions and what they gain from this method of media consumption.

Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979) explored the relationship between the psychological motivated and communication gratifications by focusing on gratifications sought and gratifications received through media engagement. This research developed the expectancy value model of gratifications sought to demonstrate that gratifications will not be sought from media if said media does not process the attribute the media viewer is searching for. Karimi et al. (2014) further studies one's gratifications sought and obtained through social networking sites. The study focuses on Iranian, British, and South African higher education students to demonstrate how social media sites satisfy different needs across differing cultures. At the time, researchers questioned why this newer media form was so enticing. Karimi et al. (2014) monitored the differences in motivations for joining different social networking sites including passing time, interpersonal utility,

information seeking, entertainment, and convenience. Here, the uses and gratifications approach is split into two parts; factors that predict motivations for media usage and understanding the audience's behaviors and motivations.

Dolan et al. (2016) created a theoretical model based on the uses and gratification theory to explain media users' social media engagement behavior. The interactive nature of social media allows users to become "active participants" in the media they consume (Dolan et al., 2016, p. 261). Then, the uses and gratifications theory consider the active role an audience has in media consumption. In media studies, Herzog (1944) first describes gratification as the "specific types or dimensions of satisfaction reported by audience members of daytime radio programs." Social media is categorized into four distinct groups: information, entertainment, remunerative, and relational (Dolan et al., 2016). Evidence connected to relational content demonstrates that people use social media and other aspects of the Internet to satisfy their needs for integration and social interaction (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004). The uses and gratifications approach provides the framework necessary to understand why people use social media and interact with Influencers the way they do.

Given the current research on parasocial relationships, the current study expanded our understanding of parasocial relationships to include online-mediated communication. Parasocial relationships typically include those interactions and relationships formed between the media viewer and the media performer that is not aware of the viewer's explicit existence. Thus, having online interactions or even a relationship with media personae does not necessarily mean the "media performer" knows the viewer. Social media allows users to be active participants in the media they engage with, including Influencers. The potential for interaction with a favorite Influencer may entice users to engage with that media persona more. Individuals may also form



these parasocial relationships for different reasons, just as they choose to use various media outlets to achieve a specific goal. To the discussion of parasocial relationships in the digital age, I add that the term ‘parasocial relationships’ rather than ‘parasocial interaction’ should also be used to describe relationships with social media Influencers and other online media personae because of the continuous exposure and the potential for direct engagement users have with the Influencer. The present study posed the following hypotheses:

H1: There will be a positive association between level of engagement with social media influences and strength of PSR.

H2: There will be a positive association between identification with an influencer and strength of a PSR.

H3: There will be a positive association between wishful identification with a social media Influencers and the strength of the PSR.

H4: There will be a positive association between homophily and PSR with social media influencers.

### Chapter 3. Methods and Measures

To test the proposed hypotheses, a survey was conducted using the MEL participant pool. This method was chosen because as previous research described in Chapter 2 has also used survey data collection to study parasocial relationships.

*Sample.* Participants were recruited using the participation pool through the Media Effects Lab at Louisiana State University. The survey received 205 responses. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 39. The age range required for this study was 18-26. This was selected based on the Statista report detailing the "Percentage of adults in the United States who use social networks as of February 2019, by age group." Two responses were omitted because their reported ages were outside the designated scope. 16.1% of participants identified as men, while 83.4% identified as women. The remaining 0.5% of participants identified as non-binary. 79.5% of participants identified as White/Caucasian, 4.4% identified as Hispanic/Latino, 17.1% identified as African American, 2.9% identified as Native America/American Indian, 2.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and the 2.5% responded to the "other (please specify)" option and reported their ethnicity as Middle Eastern. Classification of participants ranged from Freshman to Graduate Students at LSU. In total, 31 Freshmen, 50 Sophomores, 57 Juniors, 57 Seniors, and 10 Graduate students. Full results are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics Profile of Sample Summary

<i>Variable</i>	<i>n=205</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	33	16.1
Female	171	83.4
Non-Binary	1	0.5
<b>Race</b>		
White/Caucasian	163	79.5
Hispanic/Latino	9	4.4
Black/African American	35	17.1
Native American/American Indian	2	2.9
Asian/Pacific Islander	5	2.4
Other	5	2.5
Age	20.48 (SD = 1.38)	
<b>Classification</b>		
Freshman	31	15.1
Sophomore	50	24.4
Junior	57	27.8
Senior	57	27.8
Graduate Student	10	4.9
<b>Social Media Apps</b>		
Twitter	92	44.9
Instagram	191	93.2
Snapchat	99	48.3
TikTok	159	77.6
YouTube	119	58.0
Other	6	2.9

To understand the extent of social media use, participants were asked to report their time spent on social media and on which apps (see Table 2). An example question from the scale asks, “What is your estimated time spent on social media per week?” and “What social media apps do you engage with Influencers on?”. 54.1% of respondents reported using social media for more than 6 hours per week, 22.0% reported using social media between 5 and 6 hours per week, 18.5% said they used social media between 3 and 4 hours throughout the week, 4.4% used social media between 2 and 3 hours, and 1.1% used social media for 1-2 hours per week. Respondents were also asked to

report the apps they used to engage with Influencers on. 44.9% used Twitter, 93.2% used Instagram, 48.3% used Snapchat, 77.6% used TikTok, 58.0% used YouTube, and 2.9% reported using other apps not specified in the survey to engage with Influencers.

Table 2. Time Spent on Social Media Summary

<i>Variable</i>	<i>n=205</i>	<i>%</i>
1-2 hours	2	1.0
Between 2 and 3 hours	9	4.4
Between 3 and 4 hours	38	18.5
Between 5 and 6 hours	45	22.0
More than 6 hours	111	54.1

*Procedure.* Students were able to access the survey through the MEL Research Participation System. After indicating their age and LSU classification, respondents who fit the criteria were prompted to move on to the remainder of the study. The survey was split into sections that prompted respondents to report their estimated social media usage, what social media platforms they use to engage with Influencers, the Influencer they engage with most, the personality of the Influencer, and the content said Influencer produces. Participants were informed of the definition of a social media Influencer (an individual who uses social media to garner a large yet niche audience they interact with across multiple social media platforms) and asked to name a social media Influencer they engage with most. The named Influencer was referred to in all subsequent scaled items. The following segments input the named Influencer within the EPIS scale items, CPSI scale items, Wishful Identification scale items, Identification scale items, and the Homophily scale's items where a name would be.

*Engagement with Social Media Influencers Measure.* To understand the amount of engagement with social media Influencers, participants were asked to name an Influencer they engage with, how often they are engaging with that Influencer, and what the engagement entails. Example questions from the survey asked, “What social media Influencer do you engage with most frequently?”, “On a scale of ‘1’ to ‘5’ (‘1’ being “not frequent at all” and ‘5’ being “very frequently”), how often do you engage with this social media Influencer, and “How do you engage with this social media Influencer? (Select all that apply)”. Responses to the question included “replying to posts,” “liking posts,” “sharing posts,” and “direct messaging.” These items were summed to create a second engagement score as a result of this computation. The possible range of scores was 0 to 6. Respondents are also asked to also describe the Influencer including the content they post and other aspects of the Influencer’s personality.

*Parasocial Relationship Strength Measure.* An adapted version of the EPSI-Scale (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011) is used to measure the strength of parasocial relationships between social media users and social media Influencers (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .998$ ). The scale items were in the form of a 5-point Likert scale where 1 is “strongly disagree” and 5 is “strongly agree.” Scale items began with the prompt “While engaging with [Influencer’s] content, [Influencer]” with more specific phrases following including “is aware of me, knew I was there, knew I was aware of them, knew I paid attention to them, knew that I reacted to them, and reacted to what I said or did” (Hartmann & Goldhoorn). The 20-item Celebrity-Parasocial Interaction Scale (Bocarnea & Brown, 2007), was also used here (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .994$ ). Participants were prompted to answer items on a 5-point Likert scale with ‘1’ being “strongly disagree” and ‘5’ being “strongly agree. Items included the name of the Influencer the participant submitted in a previous question. Additionally, the survey

posed three questions to gauge how much the Influencer has impacted the respondent's life, the seriousness of the relationship with the influencer, and how well the respondent believes they know the Influencer.

*Identification Measure.* Identification was measured using a scale provided by Cohen (2001). While Cohen's scale is initially used to measure individuals' levels of identification with media characters in television, film, or literature, the items have been adjusted to pertain to social media Influencers (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .999$ ). The adjusted items read as follows: "While viewing [Influencer], I have felt as if I was part of the action; While viewing [Influencer], I forgot myself and was fully absorbed; I was able to understand the events in the program in a manner similar to that in which [Influencer] understood them; I think I have a good understanding of [Influencer] I tend to understand the reasons why [Influencer] does what he or she does. While viewing the content, I could feel the emotions [Influencer] portrayed; During the viewing, I felt I could really get inside [Influencer's] head; At key moments, I have felt I knew exactly what [Influencer] was going through; While viewing the program, I wanted [Influencer] to achieve his or her goals; When [Influencer] succeeded I felt joy, but when he or she failed, I was sad." This measure used a 5-point Likert scale with '1' being "Strongly disagree" and '5' being "Strongly agree."

*Wishful Identification Measure.* Wishful identification was measured using a 3-item scale from Hoffner (1996). (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .997$ ). Participants were reminded of the Influencer they identified earlier in the survey as they answered the questions on the scale. Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale with '1' being "strongly disagree" and '5' being "strongly agree."

Example items from this scale include “I’d like to do the kinds of things he/she does on the show; he/she is the sort of person I want to be like myself; I wish I could be more like him/her.”

*Homophily Measure.* This study used McCroskey and Richmond’s (1975) two 4-item homophily scales. Items 1 and 3 of the Attitude Homophily scale were reverse coded (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .761$ ). The 7-point Likert scale gauges respondents’ feelings of homophily towards a specific person. Items from this scale include “[name] is like me”, “[name] is different from me”, “[name] thinks like me”, and “[name] doesn’t behave like me.” Respondents are asked to rate their feelings on a scale of ‘1’ to ‘7’ with ‘1’ being “a very weak feeling.” And ‘7’ being a “very strong feeling.”

The Behavior Homophily scale also used a 7-point Likert scale with ‘1’ being “a very weak feeling” and ‘7’ being a “very strong feeling.” The scale prompted respondents to indicate their feelings for the Influencer with statements such as “[name] has status like mine”, “[name] is from a different social class”, “[name] is culturally different from me”, and “[name] has an economic situation like mine.” Items 1 and 4 of the Behavior Homophily scale were reverse coded (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .617$ ). Table 3 provides a summary of all dependent variables.

Table 3. Dependent Variables Summary

Dependent Variables	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation (SD)</i>
Engagement	3.03	(7.24)
Celebrity Parasocial Interaction	2.65	(7.20)
Experience Parasocial Interaction	1.64	(7.15)
Identification	2.92	(7.20)
Wishful Identification	3.22	(7.24)
Attitude Homophily	4.35	(1.18)
Background Homophily	3.36	(1.27)



## Chapter 4. Results

### *Preliminary Analysis*

I conducted additional analysis for the types of Influencers respondents reported engaging with. The survey asked participants to report what types of content their choice Influencer produces and to select all that apply. The results included comedy (36.1%), vlogging (37.1%), cooking (9.3%), fashion (42.4%), gaming (5.9%), true crime (3.9%), podcasts (27.8%), singing (5.4%), sports (10.7%), commentary (20.5%), as well as to specify any other content (23.9%) not previously listed. Other content specified by respondents included “fitness,” “lifestyle,” “makeup/beauty,” “politics,” “feminism,” “travel,” “family,” “entrepreneurship,” “financial,” and “home decor.”

The survey asked participants to name a particular Influencer they engage with the most. Of the 180 submissions, 11 social media Influencers were named by multiple respondents. These Influencers include Addison Rae (x2), Anna Sitar (x3), Cody Ko (x2), Drew Afuelo (x2), Emma Chamberlin (x3), Hannah Meloche (x2), Joe Rogan (x2), Krista Horton (x2), Kylie Jenner (x2), Quenlin Blackwell (x2), The Kardashians/Kim Kardashian (x3), and Tinx (x2). Respondents also described these Influencers to their best ability in the following question.

Table 4  
*Influencer Types Summary*

Variables	n=205	%
Content		
Comedy	74	36.1
Cooking	19	9.3
Vlogging	76	37.1
Fashion	87	42.4
Gaming	12	5.9
True crime	8	3.9
Podcast	57	27.8
Singing	11	5.4
Sports	22	10.7
Commentary	42	20.5
Other	49	23.9

Largely, the attractiveness of the Influencer is described in detail when respondents were asked to “describe the Influencer.” The most common physical characteristics of the most-mentioned Influencers included young, female, pretty, beautiful, and fit. The most common personality characteristics of the most-mentioned Influencers included being friendly, funny, outgoing, and genuine. The physical attractiveness and aggregable personality of the Influencer plays a role in why social media users choose to follow or engage with a particular Influencer.

### **Main Analyses**

Hypothesis 1 posited that there would be a positive correlation between the level of engagement with social media influences and the strength of PSR. After computing the engagement items into a sum to create a new engagement scale, I conducted correlation tests between the engagement scale and the CPSI scale, the engagement scale and the EPSI scale, the engagement scale and how much the Influencer has impacted the respondent’s life, engagement scale and the seriousness of the relationship with the Influencer, and the engagement scale and how well the respondent believes they know the Influencer.

The bivariate correlation test between the engagement and CPSI scales ( $r = .991, p < .001$ ) is statistically significant. Therefore, there is a positive association between engagement with social media Influencers and celebrity parasocial interaction. The bivariate correlation test between the engagement and EPSI scales ( $r = .988, p < .001$ ) produced statistically significant results demonstrating that engagement with social media Influencers is associated with experiencing parasocial interaction. Finally, the bivariate correlation tests between the engagement scale and how much the Influencer has impacted the respondent's life ( $r = .986, p < .001$ ), the engagement scale and the seriousness of the relationship with the Influencer ( $r = .989, p < .001$ ), and the engagement scale and how well the respondent believes they know the Influencer ( $r = .989, p < .001$ ) all yielded statistically highly significant results. These results support that engagement with social media Influencers is related to users pursuing new hobbies/interests or activities, the seriousness of the relationship between the social media user and the Influencer, and how well the user feels they know the Influencer.

Bivariate correlation tests were also computed for the single engagement item and the CPSI scale, the EPSI scale, how much the Influencer has impacted the respondent's life, the seriousness of the relationship with the Influencer, and how well the respondent believes they know the Influencer. The single engagement item asked respondents how often they engage with social media Influencers. The correlation between the single engagement item and the Celebrity Parasocial Interaction scale ( $r = .986, p < .001$ ) is statistically highly significant, suggesting a positive association between frequent engagement with social media Influencers and celebrity parasocial interaction exists. The correlation between the single engagement item and the Experience Parasocial Interaction scale ( $r = .981, p < .001$ ) denotes a small, statistically significant relationship. Finally, a statistically significant relationship exists between the single engagement

item and how much the Influencer has impacted the respondent's life ( $r = .981, p < .001$ ), the single engagement item and the seriousness of the relationship with the Influencer ( $r = .985, p < .001$ ), and the single engagement item and how well the respondent believes they know the Influencer ( $r = .984, p < .001$ ). In sum, these results support the first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2 posited that there would be a positive association between identification with a social media Influencer and the strength of a parasocial relationship. Bivariate correlation tests were conducted to determine the relationship between the Identification scale and the Celebrity Parasocial Interaction scale, the Experience Parasocial Interaction scale, how much the Influencer has impacted the respondent's life, the seriousness of the relationship with the Influencer, and how well the respondent believes they know the Influencer. The relationship between identification with social media Influencers and celebrity parasocial interaction ( $r = .991, p < .001$ ) is positive. There is also a positive association between identification and experiencing parasocial interactions ( $r = .986, p < .001$ ). The bivariate correlation tests between the Identification scale and how much the Influencer has impacted the respondent's life ( $r = .985, p < .001$ ), the Identification scale and the seriousness of the relationship with the Influencer ( $r = .990, p < .001$ ), and the Identification scale and how well the respondent believes they know the Influencer ( $r = .990, p < .001$ ) all produced statistically significant results. Thus, H2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3 focused on the possibility of a positive association between wishful identification with social media Influencers and the strength of the PSR. The relationship between wishful identification with social media Influencers and celebrity parasocial interaction ( $r = .988, p < .001$ ) is positive. The relationship between wishful identification and experiencing parasocial interaction ( $r = .980, p < .001$ ) is also positive. The bivariate correlation tests between the Wishful Identification scale and how much the Influencer has impacted the respondent's life ( $r = .987, p <$

.001), the Wishful Identification scale and the seriousness of the relationship with the Influencer ( $r = .985, p < .001$ ), and the Wishful Identification scale and how well the respondent believes they know the Influencer ( $r = .984, p < .001$ ) also indicated a statistically significant correlation. Thus, H3 was supported.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that there would be a positive association between homophily and parasocial relationships with social media Influencers. The homophily analysis was broken into two parts. The first analyses tested the correlation between attitude homophily, celebrity parasocial interaction, experience parasocial interaction, how much the Influencer has impacted the respondent's life, the seriousness of the relationship with the Influencer, and how well the respondent believes they know the Influencer. Attitude homophily and celebrity parasocial interaction ( $r = .062, p = .444$ ) were not correlated. Similarly, attitude homophily and experience parasocial interaction ( $r = .054, p = .379$ ) were not correlated. The bivariate correlation tests between the attitude homophily scale and how much the Influencer has impacted the respondent's life ( $r = .073, p = .298$ ), the attitude homophily scale and the seriousness of the relationship with the Influencer ( $r = .079, p = .260$ ) and the attitude homophily scale and how well the respondent believes they know the Influencer ( $r = .077, p = .275$ ) all produced statistically insignificant correlations. These results indicate that attitude homophily has very little impact on social media user's pursuing new hobbies/interests or activities because of an Influencer, the seriousness of the relationship between the social media user and the Influencer, and how well the user feels they know the Influencer. These results do not support Hypothesis 4.

The second set of analyses tested the correlation between background homophily, celebrity parasocial interaction, experience parasocial interaction, how much the Influencer has impacted the respondent's life, the seriousness of the relationship with the Influencer, and how well the

respondent believes they know the Influencer. Background homophily and celebrity parasocial interaction ( $r = -.003, p = .971$ ) are not correlated. Similarly, background homophily and experience parasocial interaction ( $r = -.040, p = .567$ ) are also not correlated. Furthermore, the bivariate correlation tests between the background homophily scale and how much the Influencer has impacted the respondent's life ( $r = -.043, p = .541$ ), the background homophily scale and the seriousness of the relationship with the Influencer ( $r = -.018, p = .797$ ) and the background homophily scale and how well the respondent believes they know the Influencer ( $r = -.015, p = .827$ ) all produced negative correlations. These results indicate that background homophily has very little to no impact on social media user's pursuing new hobbies/interests or activities because of an Influencer, the seriousness of the relationship between the social media user and the Influencer, and how well the user feels they know the Influencer. Therefore, hypothesis 4 was not supported.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion, Limitations, Future Research, and Conclusions**

The aim of this study is to analyze what is associated with parasocial relationships with social media Influencer. This analysis stemmed from the idea that engagement with social media Influencers as well as higher levels of wishful identification and homophily will be associated with the development of parasocial relationships. Based on the results, there is also evidence to support that engagement with social media Influencers is related to users pursuing new hobbies/interests or activities, the seriousness of the relationship between the social media user and the Influencer, and how well the user feels they know the Influencer. The results for Hypothesis 1 demonstrated that people are more likely to experience parasocial interaction the more they engage with the Influencer. Instagram and TikTok were the apps indicated by respondents most used to engage with influencers. This is evident in the list of social media Influencers that respondents engage with most.

The results of Hypothesis 2 illustrate that identification is strongly correlated to users pursuing new hobbies/interests or activities, the seriousness of the relationship between the social media user and the Influencer, and how well the user feels they know the Influencer. Social media users' ability to understand a character's feelings and motivations reflects their perspective taking abilities that relates to empathy. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Sestir and Green (2010) find identification with media characters effects viewers' self-concept. While consuming media, viewers may believe they possess similar traits as media characters. Identification and engagement with media personae may also alleviate feelings of loneliness as the user is able to feel connected to the Influencer on the other side of the screen.

Hypothesis 3 was also supported by the results. Wishful identification is the desire to be like a media character. Wishful identification was positively correlated to both experiencing

parasocial interaction and celebrity persona interaction. Social media users may find themselves subconsciously wishing to be like the influencers they follow. The lavish lifestyles and glossy photos shared by social media Influencers may entice their followers to keep up with the Influencers postings and increase the follower's desire to do what the Influencer is.

Homophily had a different impact on parasocial relationships with social media Influencers than expected. Hypothesis 4 tested the correlations between attitude homophily and background homophily with and EPSI, CPSI, as well as the impact on social media user's pursuing new hobbies/interests or activities because of an Influencer, the seriousness of the relationship between the social media user and the Influencer, and how well the user feels they know the Influencer. For attitude homophily, all correlations were weak. The attitude homophily items presented phrases that measured the similarity of attitudes and of social media users and Influencers. The potential similarity of these aspects of an Influencer do not seem to be as important to the user as the desire to be them is. Engaging with content produced by an Influencer that shares similar attitudes as the viewer may encourage the development and increase the strength of the parasocial relationship. Background homophily, also had very little impact on CSPI, EPSI, and on the social media user's pursuing new hobbies/interests or activities because of an Influencer, the seriousness of the relationship between the social media user and the Influencer, and how well the user feels they know the Influencer. The background of the Influencer including their economic situation, social status, social class, and culture were not as important of factors for the parasocial relationship as the attitudes or beliefs of the Influencer were.

The null findings of Hypothesis 4, moreover, conflict with those of hypotheses 2 and 3. Identification with social media Influencers was strong meaning social media user's find themselves emersed in the life and content of the Influencer. As previously mentioned, wishful



identification was positively correlated to celebrity parasocial interaction and experience parasocial interaction. The desire to be like the Influencer while engaging with their content is stronger than the social media user's interest in engaging with Influencers who share similar backgrounds as themselves. Both attitude and background homophily may have no significant impact on the social media user's parasocial relationship with an Influencer because of the rise of social media stardom as a profession. People's desire to do the things and live the life an Influencer does far outweighs their need to follow and engage with people similar to themselves. The lavish or easy going lifestyles presented by Influencers may further entice their viewers to want to be and wish to have the Influencer's life.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without its limitations. While the face validity of each scale used is favorable, discriminant validity is a concern as the correlations from my analysis are very high. These high values imply that the measures are tapping into the same things when these concepts are supposed to be different. The cross-sectional survey used for this study posed questions and scale items that could have caused respondents to fall back on their general feelings of the Influencer, such as whether and how much they enjoy the Influencers' content. Cross-sectional surveys also only focus on a single period of time. Future research may explore and explicate these concepts, parasocial relationships and identification, in relationship to one another as well as develop longitudinal experiments to alleviate these issues. Developing questions or scales for surveys that separate these concepts for validity would also be necessary.

The high correlations may also be a result of the context of social media in this case. Respondents were asked to think of the Influencer they engaged with most on social media whereas other studies of parasocial relationships provide media that participants view during the survey.

Having to reflect on their social media use and engagement with a particular Influencer may have caused discrepancies in respondents reporting their actual engagement and identification with said Influencer.

Self-report data can be biased. Respondents may give answers that are more socially acceptable than truthful ones. Subjects may also be unable to assess themselves fully to accurately answer the scales. Meaning respondents may not truthfully report their social media engagement in this survey. The survey was also administered in a short time frame limiting the number of students that were able to participate. The survey administered also did not gauge the number of interactions respondents had with influencers, but rather just to name the ways the respondent engaged with the Influencer. Without knowing exactly how much the user engages with the Influencer, we are unable to learn how either prolonged or minimal interactions impact the parasocial relationship between the social media user and the Influencer. The engagement measure developed for this study asked respondents to select all methods they engage with the social media Influencer. While the Cronbach's Alpha score was favorable, this was the first time this particular measure has been used.

The scales used could also pose limitations to the study. The experience parasocial interaction scale intended to measure the participants “mutual awareness, attention, and adjustment with a media character in an exposure situation.” (Dibble et al, 2016, p. 7). This scale is most commonly used for accessing parasocial interaction with media characters on television or film rather than with social media Influencers. In previous research, the experience parasocial interaction scale is applied after respondents engage with a piece of media used for the study. The current study did not provide participants with any media, but rather asked participants to reflect on their social media use. Regardless, social media Influencers may still be identified as media

characters because of the personas they portray to their audience. The homophily scales, which yielded negative correlations or weak correlations for all tests, also pose limitations to this study. Attitude homophily measured respondents' similarities in beliefs and behavior with Influencers while background homophily measured the respondents' similarities in economic situation, social status, and culture. In total, the homophily scales presented respondents with 8 items.

In Chapter 2, I also discussed the differences in definitions of identification in regards to media effects. While I have an affinity towards Moyer-Gusé's explication of identification, this study still relied on Cohen's (2001) identification scale. Moyer-Gusé's explication of identification is an expansion of Brown's (2015) definition and is still significant to note as it relates to studying parasocial relationships between social media users and social media Influencers. The idea that identification occurs before parasocial interaction or transportation demonstrates the importance of identifying with media characters before forming parasocial relationships with them.

### **Future Research**

Research on parasocial relationships with social media Influencers is a relatively new study area. Most research on parasocial relationships has focused on those interactions with television or movie characters, not social media Influencers and other online media personae. Other studies regarding parasocial relationships and online personalities have focused primarily on YouTube creators (Kurtin et. al, 2018). Future research could explore who is more likely to form a parasocial relationship with online influencers, and whether age affects the strength of that relationship.

Focusing on the impact of age on parasocial relationships with online influencers or media personae could yield informative results. What age group is more likely to form a parasocial relationship with an influencer. How does the strength of these relationships differ? Does race play

a factor in this, as well? Perhaps taking the race of the Influencer and the individual into consideration could yield fascinating results. Are people more likely to form a parasocial relationship with Influencers of the same race/ethnicity as them, or does it not matter? It is also interesting to note whether people are aware that the Influencer is a mediated persona and not necessarily being their genuine selves. Does this affect how people perceive Influencers and whether they will interact with them or not? Another approach to this area of study could be from the social media Influencer's perspective. Future researchers taking this approach could interview these social media Influencers to determine their interpretation of their relationships with fans. Do Influencers feel as connected to their followers as their followers feel connected to them? There are several types of Influencers on social media, including models, make-up artists, chefs, dancers, comedians, family vloggers, and more. A future study could compare people's levels of interaction, involvement, and interest in these influencers who have such varying niche audiences.

As previously stated, the chosen method of this study also posed as a limitation. Cross sectional surveys do not offer researchers definitive answers for cause-and-effect relationships. This survey type cannot allow for the examination of temporal ordering. It is not possible, with a cross-sectional survey, to determine whether PSRs are encouraging identification or whether identification precedes parasocial relationships (as argued by Moyer-Guse, 2015). Experimental designs would allow for further examination and expansion of these results. Future research may seek to perform longitudinal analysis of parasocial relationships with social media Influencers to fill in this gap in research. Longitudinal studies also allow for high levels of validity and make it possible to identify any developmental trends in data (Yee & Niemeier, 1996).

The second aim of this study was to further conceptualize the concept of parasocial relationships to include these online mediated relationships and interactions. These relationships reflect the one-

sided nature of parasocial relationships as it involves minimal interaction or feedback from the Influencer. It is not the actual interaction but the perceived possibility of future interactions (through direct address, comments, etc.) that could change the feeling of connection with the influencer. The individual may feel connected and seen as if they know the Influencer personally, while the Influencer is only doing their job and does not necessarily know the person they have interacted with or the impact that the Influencer has. As presented by Bond (2016), a pivotal element to parasocial relationships is realism. Social media users need to perceive posts as authentic to strengthen parasocial relationships. Future research may also seek to include survey items pertaining to realism to explore the impact of perceived realism on online mediated relationships.

## **Conclusions**

This paper explored how parasocial relationships are formed with social media Influencers and the correlations between This study offers more insight on research of parasocial relationships with social media Influencers as the use of these applications and popularity of Influencers continues to grow. I proposed that the possibility and amount of interaction between the Influencer and the individual would also entice people to engage with the Influencer more frequently. Engagement with social media influencers was shown to have significant impact on respondents' desire to pursue new hobbies/interests or activities, illustrated how serious respondents took the relationship between themselves and the Influencer, and how well the respondents felt they knew the Influencer. The possibility of the Influencer responding or acknowledging the user may drive them to engage with the Influencer more, thus building on an existing parasocial relationship.

## Appendix A. Study Consent Form

1. **Study Title:** Parasocial Relationships in The Age of Online Influencers
2. **Purpose of Study.** The purpose of this study is to determine the extent of people's parasocial relationships with social media Influencers and further conceptualize the term 'parasocial relationship' to include these online mediated relationships or interactions.
3. **Inclusion Criteria:** Participants of this study must be age 18-29 years old.
4. **Exclusion Criteria:** If you are under 18 years old or over 29 years old, you may not participate in this study.
5. **Procedures to be followed.** If you agree to partake in this research, you will be asked to answer a questionnaire designed to measure your social media use, engagement with social media influencers, how much you identify with these influencers and the strength of the parasocial relationship you may have with an influencer.
6. **Discomforts and Risks.** The study involves minimal risk; that is, no risks to your physical or mental health beyond those encounters in the normal course of everyday life.
7. **Benefits.** The benefits to participants include learning about yourself as a social media user and your interactions or relationships with online influencers.
8. **Duration.** This survey will take no longer than 25 minutes to complete.
9. **Statement of Privacy.** All responses in this study are confidential. No identifying information will be included in any of the answers that you provide. Your confidentiality will be maintained to the degree allowed by the technology used. If this research is presented or published, no information that would identify you will be included because your name will be in no way linked to your responses.
10. **Right to Refuse.** Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.
11. **Right to Ask Questions.** you have the right to ask questions at any point in time about the research. Contact Sydney Reynolds ([sreyn25@lsu.edu](mailto:sreyn25@lsu.edu)) with questions. This study has been approved by the LSU IRB. If you have any questions about your right as a research participant, contact IRB Chair, Alex Cohen, 578-8692, or [irb.lsu.edu](http://irb.lsu.edu).
12. **Voluntary/Compensation.** Participation in this study is purely voluntary, and no compensation is guaranteed for participation. However, by completing this survey you

will receive .5 MEL credit points. Completion and submission of this questionnaire imply that you have read the information in this form and consent to participate in the research.

13. **Consent.** By continuing this survey, you are giving consent to participate in this study.

## Appendix B. Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age?
  - a. 18-22
  - b. 23-26
  - c. 27-29
2. What is your gender?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Non-binary
  - d. Transgender
  - e. Prefer not to say
3. What is your ethnicity?
  - a. White/Caucasian
  - b. Hispanic/Latino
  - c. Black/African American
  - d. Native American/ American Indian
  - e. Asian/Pacific Islander
  - f. Other (please specify)
4. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?
  - a. Less than a high school diploma
  - b. High school degree or equivalent
  - c. Bachelor's degree
  - d. Master's degree
  - e. Doctorate
  - f. Other (please specify)
5. What is your employment status?
  - a. Employed full time (40+ hours a week)
  - b. Employed part time (less than 40 hours a week)
  - c. Unemployed (currently looking for work)
  - d. Unemployed (not currently looking for work)
  - e. Student



- f. Retired
  - g. Self-employed
6. What is your estimated time spent on social media per week?
- a. Less than 1 hour
  - b. 1.5-2 hours
  - c. 2.5-3 hours
  - d. 3.5-4 hours
  - e. 4.5-5 hours
  - f. 5.5-6 hours
  - g. More than 6.5 hours
7. What social media apps do you use to engage with Influencers? Select all that apply
- a. Twitter
  - b. Instagram
  - c. TikTok
  - d. Snapchat
  - e. YouTube
  - f. Other (please specify)
8. What social media Influencer do you often engage with most frequently? (Please type your answer)
- a. The answer given here will be used to fill in the 'Influencer' blank for the ESPI Scale and PSI Scale
9. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being "not frequent at all" and 5 being "very frequently"), how often do you engage to this social media Influencer (i.e., replying to posts, liking, or sharing tweets, sharing their content with others)?
- a. 1
  - b. 2
  - c. 3
  - d. 4
  - e. 5
10. How do you engage with this social media Influencer? (select all that apply)". Responses to the question include

- a. replying to posts
- b. liking posts
- c. sharing posts
- d. direct messaging
- e. other (please specify)

Appendix C. Questions 55-57

1. How much has the influencer's lifestyle inspired you to pursue a particular hobby, career, or other activity?
2. How seriously do you take your relationship with the influencer?
3. How well do you feel you know this influencer?

### Appendix D. Experience Parasocial Interaction Scale

On a scale of 1-7 (with 1 being “do not agree at all” and 7 being “totally agree”), please answer the following items:

While engaging with the Influencer, I had the feeling that [name]...

1. was aware of me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. knew I was there.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. knew I was aware of them.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. knew I paid attention to them.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. knew that I reacted to them.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. reacted to what I said or did.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Appendix E. Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale  
© Bocarnea & Brown, 2007

Survey: English Version

Please read the following questions carefully and answer as candidly as you can placing the number of your choice in the blank to the left of each question.

\*\*\*\*\*

Based on a 1 – 5 scale, please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the next statements, where:

1) Strongly disagree    2) Disagree    3) Neutral    4) Agree    5) Strongly Agree

1. [celebrity or persona] makes me feel as if I am with a someone I know well
2. If [celebrity or persona] appeared on a TV program, I would watch that program.
3. I see [celebrity or persona] as a natural down- to-earth person.
4. If I saw a newspaper or magazine story about [celebrity or persona], I would read it.
5. I would like to meet [celebrity or persona] in person.
6. I feel that I understand the emotions [celebrity or persona] experiences.
7. I find myself thinking about [celebrity or persona] on a regular basis.
8. I do not have any feelings about [celebrity or persona].
9. I like to watch [celebrity or persona] on television.
10. Whenever I am unable to get news about [celebrity or persona], I really miss it.
11. Learning about [celebrity or persona] is important to me.
12. I have been seeking out information in the media to learn more [celebrity or persona].
13. I sometimes go to the Internet to obtain more information about [celebrity or persona].
14. Sometimes I feel like calling or writing [celebrity or persona].
15. [celebrity or persona] understands the kinds of things I want to know.
16. I sometimes make remarks to [celebrity or persona] while watching television.

17. I am very much aware of the details of [celebrity or persona]'s life.
18. I feel like I have very little understanding of [celebrity or persona] as a person.
19. I look forward to seeing [celebrity or persona] on television or in the print media.
20. I am not really interested in [celebrity or persona].

## Appendix F. Identification Scale

© Cohen, 2001

On a scale of 1-5 with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree”, please indicate your degree of agreement with the following statements.

1. While viewing [Influencer], I felt as if I was part of the action.
2. While viewing [Influencer], I forgot myself and was fully absorbed.
3. I was able to understand the events in the program in a manner similar to that in which [Influencer] understood them.
4. I think I have a good understanding of [Influencer].
5. It ends to understand the reasons why [Influencer], does what he or she does.
6. While viewing the show I could feel the emotions [Influencer], portrayed.
7. During viewing, I felt I could really get inside [Influencer's], head.
8. At key moments in the show, I felt I knew exactly what [Influencer], was going through.
9. While viewing the program, I wanted character [Influencer], to succeed in achieving his or her goals.
10. When [Influencer], succeeded I felt joy, but when he or she failed, I was sad.

Appendix G. Wishful Identification Scale

© Hoffner, 1996

On a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being “do not agree at all” and 5 being “totally agree”), please answer the following items:

<i>I'd like to do the kinds of things [name] does.</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>[name] is the sort of person I want to be like myself</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>I wish I could be more like [name].</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>



Appendix H. Attitude Homophily Scale

© McCroskey, Richmond, & Daly, 1975

On the scales below, indicate your feelings about [name]. Numbers 1 and 7 indicate a *very strong feeling*. Numbers 2 and 6 indicate a *strong feeling*. Numbers 3 and 5 indicate a *fairly weak feeling*. Number 4 indicates that you are *unsure or undecided*. There are no right or wrong answers.

(Name of person the to whom participant is asked to respond)

- |                           |               |                     |
|---------------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| 1. Is like me             | 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 | Is unlike me        |
| 2. Is different from me   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Is similar to me    |
| 3. Thinks like me         | 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 | Does not think like |
| 4. Doesn't behave like me | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Behaves like me     |

Appendix I. Background Homophily Scale

© McCroskey, Richmond, & Daly 1975

On the scales below, indicate your feelings about [name]. Numbers 1 and 7 indicate a *very strong feeling*. Numbers 2 and 6 indicate a *strong feeling*. Numbers 3 and 5 indicate a *fairly weak feeling*. Number 4 indicates that you are *unsure or undecided*. There are no right or wrong answers.

(Name of person the to whom participant is asked to respond)

- |                                        |               |                                               |
|----------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| 1. Has status like mine                | 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 | Has status different from mine                |
| 2. Is from a different social class    | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Is from the same social class                 |
| 3. Is culturally different             | 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 | Is culturally similar                         |
| 4. Has an economic situation like mine | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Does not have an economic situation like mine |

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## VITA

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