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Parasocial Relationships: A False Paradise

Celebrity crushes, book boyfriends, and other forms of parasocial relationships have become increasingly common with the rise of social media. Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are imagined, one-sided relationships that consist of an admirer and the object of their affection, typically a celebrity or fictional character. These relationships are not typically considered in a negative light because they are comforting to the admirer and appear to be perfectly harmless. Some people argue that these relationships are beneficial to the development of the admirer, while others suggest that these relationships are harmful and prevent development. Social connection and real life relationships, which have been shown to “help reduce the risk of chronic disease and serious illness” (CDC), can be inhibited by the formation of parasocial relationships and the obsessive behavior associated with them. The long-term negative effects of parasocial relationships on the development of adolescents overpower the positive effects.

The development of parasocial relationships creates effects that appear like benefits, but can turn out to actually be a net negative in the long run. Parasocial relationships create a feeling of security and comfort for the admirer, like a cocoon that makes them feel protected from the judgement of others. These interactions also create the feeling of social interaction. While these effects seem positive, they are actually negatives in the long run. Parasocial relationships might create a “safe forum ... to experiment with different ways of being,” (Haupt) but what happens ten years or so later when the admirer has not developed social skills, has created unrealistic expectations for relationships in real life, and has not made as many real social connections as they should have? PSRs do not prepare people with the social skills necessary to navigate life by creating unrealistic ideas of social interaction and not providing the practice in conflict resolution that a real relationship provides. When adolescents engage in parasocial relationships and do not interact with real others, they “miss out on the give-and-take of real friendship,”

leaving the admirer with underdeveloped social skills (Wistar). PSRs can have negative repercussions for the remainder of the admirer's life, such as reducing their ability to apply for jobs, navigate daily social interactions, and make more real social connections. Parasocial relationships can “reward insecurity” due to the knowledge that the object of affection cannot reject or mock the admirer. This is especially prominent in people with “an anxious attachment style [or] social anxiety or depression” (Wistar). These imagined relationships also appear to provide motivation for the admirer to improve themselves and work towards their goals. There is research that states that parasocial relationships can help the admirer “become closer to their ideal self” (Haupt). Becoming the ideal version of themselves seems positive, right? Except when the methods of becoming one's best self are toxic. PSRs can lead teens “wonder[ing] why their faces and bodies don't resemble their favorite celebrity's appearance on Instagram” (Wistar), showing that attempts to emulate the celebrities that are often the objects of affection in these relationships are typically attempts to become more attractive. This effect is the basis of the toxicity of social media, which is that people create this idea of their ideal self based on unrealistic and modified portrayals of celebrities and their lifestyles, then attempt to make this idealized life their reality. Any attempt to live this life will not succeed and, in the case of becoming more attractive, could create a negative body image, lower self worth, and lead to serious conditions such as eating disorders.

Parasocial relationships in adolescents can lead to negative effects on identity and mental health, such as a lowered self worth and negative body image. The phrase “out of your league” is commonly used to describe someone who is generally perceived as significantly more attractive, skilled, and/or wealthy than the person admiring them. This phrase accurately explains the feelings of not being enough that result from the realization that parasocial relationships are highly unrealistic. Believing that someone is “out of your league” will cause feelings of inadequacy and likely attempts to better yourself resulting from a lower self-esteem and a negative body image. Parasocial relationships are known to cause “negative self comparisons, [causing the admirer's] body image [to] suffer as a result” (Wistar). Lowered self-worth also results from these comparisons and thoughts of never being good enough to be loved by a person who they have never met, which then causes real life feelings of not being good enough for the

real people surrounding the admirer. Feeling inadequate and having a negative body image can in turn cause more serious mental illnesses, especially depression, eating disorders, and anxiety (How Is Body Image Associated with Depression?). The mental health effects cause attempts by the admirers to radically change their appearance to better fit the beauty standards displayed or promoted by the celebrities that they have PSRs with, which causes their mental health to spiral downwards when constantly comparing themselves to the images of celebrities and fictional characters.

Parasocial relationships are not reflective of actual relationships and in turn create unrealistic expectations for real relationships. The very basis of these relationships is that they are not reflective of real life relationships, and therefore do not provide the health benefits or development of social skills that result from real relationships. Adolescents with PSRs will “project idealized feelings onto media personas” (Wistar), which allows them to create their own standards and expectations for social interactions. These imagined expectations are most likely not representative of the real world, as the person will imagine whatever they choose, thereby avoiding the pain and conflict of real relationships. While avoiding pain might appear to be beneficial, it prevents the development of social and conflict resolution skills making future interactions more stressful and harder to navigate. Parasocial relationships can also lead to a lack of interaction with real friends of the admirer, and therefore the lack of benefits gained from real life social interaction. While some might argue that these relationships can be supplementary to real social interaction and therefore cannot cause such drastic effects, a study by Gleason et al. found that “high [parasocial interaction] was associated with a lower inclination to communicate with real others.” This lack of communication with actual people can also be seen in a cartoon displaying the refusal of an admirer to interact with a real friend because they are fixated on their parasocial interactions with a celebrity (Denver). These interactions provide the admirer with a seemingly perfect relationship – one without the pain and difficulties of a real one – making the choice between real relationships and parasocial ones quite easy, this is due to the pleasure principle. This principle describes how humans tend to avoid pain and actively seek out pleasure, and how its effects are especially prominent in younger people, such as adolescents (American Psychological Association). The social

disadvantages of parasocial relationships stem from the lack of communication and social connection with real others, which can promote a “longer life, better health, and well-being” (CDC). Social skills and connections, which are limited by parasocial relationships, are highly important for the development of adolescents, therefore parasocial relationships cause negative effects.

The long-term negative effects of parasocial relationships on the development of adolescents , including lowered self worth, a lack of social skills, and unrealistic expectations for relationships, overpower the positive effects of these imagined interactions. PSRs are very widespread, especially since the rise of social media, meaning that these negative effects are impacting more people than ever.

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