



Parasocial Relationships

This Factsheet outlines and evaluates explanations of parasocial relationships. The Factsheet includes examiner comments and exam hints, and the worksheet gives you the opportunity to apply what you have learned to exam-style questions. Words in bold are explained in the glossary.

The examiner will expect you to be able to:

1. Describe two or more explanations of parasocial relationships.
2. Evaluate these explanations in terms of their strengths and limitations.
3. Support your answer with reference to published research.

Introduction

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are one-sided, unreciprocated relationships whereby an individual is attracted to another person who is usually unaware of their existence. Although PSRs usually occur with celebrities they may occur with anyone who has been elevated above the population in a given community or society, making it difficult for genuine social interaction. This could include fictional characters and people in authority, such as teachers.

In the past, PSRs occurred predominantly with the stars of radio, television and film. However, the Internet allows for 24-hour access which may have led to increased parasocial interactions taking place. Nowadays, PSRs can occur between individuals and their favourite bloggers, vloggers, and popular social media users. PSRs are different to virtual relationships because, although virtual relationships can be conducted via similar online media, they are two-way and involve reciprocated feelings from each of the people involved. To be classed as a PSR, however, the relationship must be one-sided, involving unreciprocated emotions, and where the 'viewer' is usually totally unknown to the person towards whom their feelings are directed. The Internet has also provided opportunities for PSRs to take on added depth and intimacy. For example, modern celebrities now openly share details of their personal lives through various social media outlets such as Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. Furthermore, the rise in reality television has enabled viewers to share the most intimate moments in the personal lives of those taking part.

All of this has meant that individuals today have the chance to achieve a sense of intimacy with people of their choosing, without the fear of rejection that often accompanies romantic relationships. There are a number of explanations of why some people develop PSRs including **attachment theory**, and the **absorption-addiction model**.

Exam Hint: You can use examples of the rapidly changing nature of online media to help evaluate theories of PSRs. This is because parasocial interactions are changing so quickly and take so many different forms, that this makes it difficult for research to accurately reflect the wide range of PSRs in existence at any one time.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory suggests that if a person experiences attachment difficulties during infancy, this may increase the likelihood of PSRs developing in later life.

People with an **insecure-resistant** attachment type are thought to be the most likely to develop PSRs compared to other attachment types. This is because they need to have unfulfilled needs met, but in a relationship that is not accompanied by the threat of rejection, break-up and disappointment that real-life relationships bring.

Those with an **insecure-avoidant** attachment type are unlikely to enter into PSRs as they find it difficult to develop intimate relationships and so avoid both real and imagined intimacy.

People with a **secure attachment** are seen as most likely to engage in real relationships.

As well as linking attachment types (or attachment styles) to the likelihood of forming PSRs as adults, it is also suggested that specific behaviours that infants show towards their attachment figures in early life are often evident in later life PSRs too (Weiss, 1991). Examples include:

- **Proximity-seeking** may occur whereby individuals attempt to reduce the distance between themselves and the attachment figure (e.g. contacting a celebrity through fan letters or in person).
- **Separation anxiety** may be evident when individuals have a severe emotional reaction to the attachment figure leaving (e.g. a celebrity being axed from a TV programme or when a series they star in comes to an end).
- **Secure base** behaviours may be present when an individual's attachment figure provides a 'safe haven' from which to explore the world (e.g. feeling a sense of security when in contact with a celebrity).

Exam Hint: Answers have been seen to sometimes lose focus when explaining attachment theory by getting drawn into explaining childhood behaviours and even studies of childhood attachment types (such as the 'Strange Situation'), rather than remaining clearly focused on using the theory to clearly explain PSRs in later life.

Attachment Theory of Parasocial Relationships

Cohen (2004) found that when participants were asked how they would react if their favourite TV characters were taken off air, those classed as having an insecure-resistant attachment type anticipated the most negative responses, similar to those that follow the loss of a real relationship. This supports the predictions of attachment theory.



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Stever (1999) cited cases of individuals who sought PSRs in response to the loss of an attachment figure. For example, one case of an 18-year-old reported finding a great deal of comfort in Michael Jackson and his music after her father left the family. This suggests Michael Jackson acted as a 'secure base' for her, as predicted by the theory, enabling her to deal with the loss of her father.

McCutcheon et al. (2006), however, found that the participants with insecure attachments were no more likely to form PSRs than those with secure attachments.

This suggests that the predictions of attachment theory are not consistently supported.

Exam Hint: Make sure you evaluate how accurate attachment theory is in explaining PSRs, not whether PSRs are healthy or beneficial.

The Absorption-Addiction Model

McCutcheon et al.'s (2002) absorption-addition model argues that when people have perceived deficiencies in their own lives, such as a lack of fulfilment in their everyday relationships, they can become pre-occupied with a celebrity and identify with them in order to achieve this sense of fulfilment (**absorption**). If the individual feels they need to sustain their commitment to the relationship by feeling stronger and closer involvement, this can lead to more extreme behaviours and delusional thinking (**addiction**).

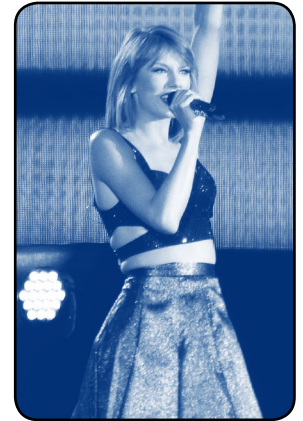


The absorption-addiction model explains PSRs in terms of **levels of parasocial relationships** as identified by Giles and Maltby (2006). This is a three-step description of PSRs in terms of increasing strength, as outlined below:

- **Entertainment-social level:** This is the least intense level of PSR where fans are attracted to a favourite celebrity, for example, and will learn about and keep up with them for the purpose of entertainment and gossip.
- **Intense-personal level:** This is the intermediate level, which reflects closer personal involvement with the celebrity figure. A person may have frequent obsessive thoughts and intense feelings about them.
- **Borderline-pathological level:** The strongest level, characterised by uncontrollable fantasies and extreme behaviours. This might include spending large sums of money on celebrity-related activities or items (e.g. on buying merchandise or clothes to look more like the celebrity).

For example, a teenage girl might begin as a huge fan of Taylor Swift, constantly talking to her friends about the singer, exchanging gossip about her, and singing her songs (entertainment-social level). As the absorption intensifies, the girl may spend large periods of her day checking Taylor Swift's updates on social media, and talking about

her with people online (intense-personal level). As the preoccupation strengthens further, she may find her interest has become more of an addiction, as it has begun to take over her life. She may have started spending most of her earnings on Taylor Swift-endorsed products, concert tickets, and imitating the way she looks, by buying clothes and cosmetics. This all-consuming behaviour may ultimately mean she loses her job as she cannot give it the required attention it needs any more (borderline-pathological level).



According to the absorption-addiction model, someone who initially has an entertainment-social orientation to a celebrity may become more intensely involved due to a personal crisis or stressful life event. Here, the motivating forces driving the increased absorption may eventually become addictive, leading the person to more extreme behaviours and delusional thinking in order to sustain the fulfilment gained from the PSR.

Exam Hint: Exam questions may ask you to outline the absorption-addiction model which can include the 'levels of parasocial relationships', or they may focus purely on the three levels on their own. The key, as always, is to read the question carefully.

Evaluation of the Absorption-Addiction Model

Maltby et al. (2005) found that 14-16-year-old females who had poor body image also reported an intense-personal PSR with a female celebrity whose body shape they admired. This supports the prediction that there is a correlation between the level (type and intensity) of PSR and perceived deficiencies in their own lives.

Schmid and Klimmt (2011) studied fans' feelings towards Harry Potter in Germany (an **individualist culture** that emphasises the needs of the individual over the group) and Mexico (a **collectivist culture** where the reverse is true). They found that fans in both countries had very similar patterns of PSRs with Harry Potter, regardless of their cultural norms and values. This suggests the model is universal and accurately reflects PSRs for a wide range of people across cultures.



However, critics argue the model provides a description of PSRs rather than an explanation of them. For instance, the model is able to describe the characteristics of people who are absorbed by and addicted to celebrity but, unlike attachment theory, it isn't able to explain how such characteristics develop.

Exam Hint: When asked to 'evaluate' a theory such as the Absorption-Addiction Model, always pay attention to the marks available for that question in order to judge how many different points you should include. 'Evaluate' usually implies more than one point should be used but be guided by the mark allocation.

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Alternative Explanations of Parasocial Relationships

Apart from attachment theory and the absorption-addiction model of PSRs, alternative explanations have focused on factors such as loneliness or our perceptions of celebrities. Greenwood and Long (2009) found that individuals may develop PSRs as a way of dealing with feeling of loneliness or loss. In this sense, PSRs may be seen to be acting as a substitute for face-to-face two-way relationships for people who feel socially isolated. However, Eyal and Cohen (2006) studied 279 fans of the TV series 'Friends' and found that the clearest predictor of their feelings of loneliness following the broadcast of the final episode was the intensity of their PSR with their favourite character. This therefore suggests PSRs may not only form as a response to social isolation and loneliness but the end of a PSR may also cause feelings of isolation too.



In research into the way viewers perceive the characters in television shows, Schiappa et al. (2007) demonstrated there was a positive correlation between the degree to which an individual perceives television characters as real and their tendency to form PSRs. This is because, if a fictional character is perceived as real and their storylines are seen as realistic, we may be able to evaluate a character's attractiveness in the same way we evaluate people in face-to-face contact. This was shown to be important even in television characters that exist in fantasy worlds that bear little resemblance to the "real" world (e.g. Buffy the Vampire Slayer), provided the character acts realistically in terms of their emotional and psychological reactions to the situations that they confront.

Exam Hint: When the exam asks you to apply your knowledge to a given scenario, it is useful to have a number of theories/explanations at your disposal. This is because some explanations may be easier to apply to certain scenarios than others. These alternative explanations of PSRs may prove useful where attachment theory or the absorption-addiction model do not clearly link to the scenario.

Conclusion

Despite there being different explanations of PSRs, each with their own focus, it seems clear that a common theme amongst all of these theories is that PSRs tend to arise out of some perceived difficulty or problem. This may be due to problematic experiences in infancy, perceived deficiencies in later life, social isolation, or inaccurate perceptions of people in the media. Having said this, evidence also suggests PSRs can be a positive experience for those who seek them, either serving to provide a substitute for attachment figures they lost or never had, or making them feel less deficient or less lonely. In terms of the healthiness of these relationships, much depends on the level of intensity of the PSR with more extreme thoughts and behaviours posing the clearest problems.

Glossary

Absorption: When an individual becomes pre-occupied with a celebrity and identifies with them in order to achieve a sense of fulfilment that is otherwise lacking.

Addiction: When an individual's need to sustain their commitment escalates through a series of stages to more extreme behaviours and thinking.

Absorption addition model: The theory that parasocial relationships arise when people lack fulfilment in their own lives and become pre-occupied with a celebrity in order to achieve this sense of fulfilment.

Attachment theory: A psychological model that uses the different types of emotional bonds individuals form in infancy to explain the relationships they go on to have in later life, in this case parasocial relationships.

Borderline-pathological: The strongest level of parasocial relationship according to the absorption-addiction model, characterised by uncontrollable fantasies and extreme behaviours.

Collectivist culture: Any culture that emphasises the rights and needs of the group over the individual.

Entertainment-social: The least intense level of parasocial relationship according to the absorption-addiction model where fans follow someone in the public eye for the purpose of entertainment and gossip.

Individualist culture: Any culture that emphasises the rights and needs of the individual over the group

Insecure-avoidant: An attachment type characterised by emotional distance from the attachment figure during infancy.

Insecure-resistant: An attachment type characterised by ambivalence towards the attachment figure during infancy.

Intense-personal: The intermediate level of parasocial relationships according to the absorption-addiction model which reflects closer personal involvement with the person to whom the 'viewer' is attracted. An individual may have frequent obsessive thoughts and intense feelings about them.

Levels of parasocial relationships: A three-step description of PSRs in terms of increasing strength.

Parasocial relationships (PSRs): One-sided, unreciprocated relationships whereby an individual is attracted to another person who is usually unaware of their existence.

Proximity-seeking: Any behaviour that enables an individual to remain close to the attachment figure.

Secure attachment: An attachment type characterised by warmth towards the attachment figure during infancy.

Separation anxiety: Distress caused by the absence of the attachment figure.

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Worksheet: Parasocial Relationships

Name: _____

1. Define the term 'parasocial relationships'.

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2. Outline the attachment theory explanation of parasocial relationships.

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3. With reference to relevant research, briefly evaluate the attachment theory explanation of parasocial relationships.

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4. Summarise the absorption-addiction model of parasocial relationships.

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5. Identify and explain the three levels of parasocial relationships.

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6. Explain one strength and one limitation of the absorption-addiction model of parasocial relationships.

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