# From Icon to Intimate: Exploring Parasocial Relationships in Indian Media through Amitabh Bachchan's Presence on Kaun Banega Crorepati

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*Abstract*—This study investigates the formation and dynamics of parasocial relationships by analyzing Amitabh Bachchan's on-screen presence as host of the Indian quiz show Kaun Banega Crorepati. It examines how his communicative strategies foster viewer perceptions of intimacy, trust, and emotional connection within the Indian media landscape. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research integrates content analysis of ten episodes aired between 2020 and 2024, semi-structured interviews with 25 diverse viewers, and online discourse analysis from YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. The findings indicate that Bachchan's consistent use of direct eye contact, conversational tone, and empathetic language contributes to an illusion of personal interaction. Viewers commonly identified with his authenticity and cultural symbolism, reinforcing his resonance as a national figure. Online discussions further reveal that audiences extend these relationships into digital spaces through personal storytelling and collective interpretations. The study concludes that parasocial relationships in Indian media are multifaceted and culturally embedded, shaped by a blend of emotional engagement, symbolic familiarity, and narrative structure. Bachchan's public persona functions simultaneously as an authoritative mentor and a relatable familial figure, intensifying emotional bonds with audiences. These findings offer insights into how media personalities construct enduring viewer connections and provide implications for the design of emotionally engaging broadcast content.

*Index Terms*—Parasocial relationships, Indian television, Amitabh Bachchan, Media intimacy, Audience engagement, Cultural communication, Kaun Banega Crorepati, Qualitative media analysis.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The emotional connections that audiences form with media personalities often in the absence of direct interaction have long intrigued media scholars. These one-sided yet subjectively intimate bonds are conceptualized as parasocial relationships, first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956). In contemporary media landscapes, particularly those saturated with celebrity hosted formats, parasocial interaction has become an essential framework for understanding how audiences experience mediated intimacy (Giles, 2002; Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016).

In India, the trajectory of parasociality has been shaped by the country's evolving media environment. The shift from state-controlled broadcasting in the 1980s to liberalization in the 1990s marked a fundamental transformation in the structure and content of television programming (Mehta, 2008). Game shows and reality television emerged as dominant formats, emphasizing host-viewer intimacy and audience participation. These developments created fertile ground for parasocial relationships, particularly in domestic spaces where television remains a primary source of entertainment and cultural exchange (Mankekar, 1999).

Kaun Banega Crorepati (KBC), the Indian adaptation of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" launched in 2000, stands out as a landmark moment in this evolution. More than a quiz show, KBC has become a cultural institution that bridges class divides and constructs shared national narratives (Punathambekar, 2010). Central to this is Amitabh Bachchan, whose role as host extends beyond information delivery to encompass mentorship, emotional reassurance, and

cultural symbolism. His communication style marked by empathetic gestures, respectful language, and relatable storytelling renders him a quasi-familial figure to viewers (Rajadhyaksha, 2009).

Despite growing interest in parasocial dynamics, most existing research remains Western-centric, often overlooking how such relationships function in non-Western contexts where values like hierarchy, reverence for elders, and familial bonding are more pronounced (Chadha & Kavoori, 2000). This study addresses that gap by investigating how Amitabh Bachchan's on-screen presence and communicative strategies foster parasocial relationships within the Indian television landscape. Specifically, it examines the verbal, non-verbal, and narrative elements that elicit viewer intimacy, while situating these findings within the broader cultural context of Indian media and contemporary parasocial theory.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The emotional bonds that audiences form with media figures particularly in non-interactive, mass media environments have been theorized as parasocial interactions (PSIs), a concept introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956). They described PSIs as one-sided yet meaningful relationships that mimic the intimacy of interpersonal interaction. Over time, the notion has evolved into the broader framework of parasocial relationships (PSRs), which emphasize the cumulative emotional investment viewers develop through prolonged exposure (Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016).

Subsequent studies have demonstrated that on-screen behaviors such as direct eye contact, conversational tone, and authenticity significantly influence the perceived closeness between viewer and media persona (Giles, 2002; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). Green and Brock's (2000) transportation theory complements this framework by suggesting that narrative immersion enhances emotional involvement, thus intensifying PSRs. When audiences are deeply engaged in storytelling or emotionally resonant content, they are more likely to form enduring bonds with the characters or hosts presented.

An important facet of parasociality is the construction of celebrity persona, which Dyer (1986) argues involves a dual strategy: presenting media figures as simultaneously extraordinary and relatable. This curated duality fosters a blend of admiration and emotional accessibility. Amitabh Bachchan exemplifies this paradox in his hosting of Kaun Banega Crorepati (KBC), where his authoritative stature as a Bollywood icon is humanized through emotional storytelling, empathetic language, and culturally resonant expressions (Rajadhyaksha, 2009). While PSR research has been extensively developed in Western contexts, the cultural dynamics of parasociality in non-Western settings especially India—are comparatively underexplored. Mankekar (1999) provides an ethnographic account of how Indian television viewers emotionally engage with narratives, often integrating media figures into everyday discourses of family, nationalism, and morality. Similarly, Punathambekar (2013) emphasizes the role of media figures like Bachchan in producing a sense of collective belonging and bridging class divides. However, few empirical studies have explicitly connected Indian celebrity-hosted shows with the mechanisms of parasocial bonding especially in relation to culturally specific values such as reverence for elders, guru-shishya (mentor-disciple) norms, and hierarchical respect (Chadha & Kavoori, 2000; Mehta, 2008).

In the age of digital convergence, parasocial relationships have extended beyond broadcast television into online platforms. Stever and Lawson (2013) observe that social media enhances perceived accessibility and deepens audience investment by offering micro-interactions between celebrities and fans. Labrecque (2014) further notes that parasocial engagement in digital spaces can be leveraged to build long-term consumer-brand relationships a concept applicable to media personas as well. In the Indian context, platforms like YouTube and Twitter have become extensions of television, where audiences engage with KBC clips and Bachchan's public persona through likes, comments, and narrative interpretation. These digital interactions reveal the communal and participatory dimensions of modern parasociality, which this study explores in depth.

Despite growing interdisciplinary interest in PSRs, there remains a critical gap in understanding how Indian media culture mediates parasocial engagement, particularly through emotionally immersive, culturally symbolic formats like KBC. This study responds to that gap by analyzing how Bachchan's communicative strategies—verbal, non-verbal, and narrative construct

intimacy, trust, and emotional connection with viewers, both on-screen and in digital discourse.

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study draws on a multi-theoretical framework to explain the formation and reinforcement of parasocial relationships between audiences and Amitabh Bachchan in Kaun Banega Crorepati. Table 1 summarizes each theory's key premise and its relevance to the current research context.

| Scholar(s) | Year | Key Contribution | Relevance to Amitabh Bachchan |
|---|---|---|---|
| Horton & Wohl | 1956 | Introduced Parasocial Interaction (PSI); described 'intimacy at a distance' | Viewers form emotionally intimate, one-sided bonds with Bachchan through his presence on KBC |
| Blumler & Katz | 1974 | Developed Uses and Gratifications Theory; media fulfills social/emotional needs | Audiences watch KBC to satisfy needs for companionship, inspiration, and emotional engagement |
| Dyer | 1986 | Formulated Star Persona Theory; celebrities are carefully constructed cultural icons | Bachchan's image balances charisma and humility, enhancing relatability and authority simultaneously |
| Green & Brock | 2000 | Proposed Narrative Transportation Theory; immersion intensifies emotional engagement | KBC's storytelling and Bachchan's empathetic narration immerse viewers and strengthen PSI bonds |
| Papacharissi | 2015 | Conceptualized Affective Publics; media as space for collective emotional expression | Social media discussions about KBC and Bachchan foster shared emotional experiences and community |

Table 1. Theoretical Framework: Key Theories and Their Relevance to Amitabh Bachchan on Kaun Banega Crorepati

## IV. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze Amitabh Bachchan's on-screen communication style and its influence on viewer perceptions of emotional intimacy.
2. To identify the verbal, non-verbal, and narrative cues that foster parasocial relationships among Kaun Banega Crorepati viewers.
3. To explore the cultural significance of Bachchan's public persona in shaping audience expectations and symbolic meaning.
4. To examine how viewers, express parasocial admiration and connection across broadcast and digital platforms.
5. To contextualize the findings within broader global trends in parasocial relationship research and celebrity studies.

## V. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does Amitabh Bachchan's on-screen presence contribute to viewers' perception of intimacy and personal connection on Kaun Banega Crorepati?
2. What specific communicative strategies—verbal, non-verbal, and narrative—strengthen parasocial bonds with Bachchan?
3. How do viewer demographics (e.g., age, gender, region, class) shape interpretations of their parasocial relationship with Bachchan?
4. In what ways do Indian cultural norms and media traditions influence the formation and expression of parasocial intimacy?
5. How do KBC's narrative structures and emotional framing contribute to the emergence of an affective public around Bachchan?

## VI. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 6.1. Research Design
This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate parasocial relationships formed through Amitabh Bachchan's presence on Kaun Banega Crorepati (KBC). A case study approach was selected to analyze this phenomenon within its natural media context. The study triangulated three data sources—television content, viewer interviews, and digital discourse to enhance credibility and analytic validity.

### 6.2. Sampling Criteria
### 6.2.1. Television Episodes
The source population included all KBC episodes aired between 2020 and 2024. Ten episodes were purposively selected based on the following criteria:

1. High Television Rating Points (TRPs), indicating strong audience engagement.
2. Presence of emotionally intense contestant-host interactions.
3. Representation of diverse contestant demographics (e.g., gender, region, socio-economic class).
4. Availability of complete, high-quality audio-visual recordings.

### 6.2.2. Interview Participants
The target population consisted of regular KBC viewers aged 18–65 residing in urban and semi-urban areas of India. Participants were recruited via snowball sampling through community networks. Inclusion criteria were:

- Consistent KBC viewership for at least two seasons.
- Ability to articulate experiences in Hindi or English.
- Demographic diversity across age (18–30, 31–45, 46–65), gender, and socio-economic groups.
- Voluntary informed consent.

A total of 25 participants were interviewed until thematic saturation was achieved.

### 6.2.3. Online Discourse Sources
Digital data were collected from user-generated content across three platforms:

- YouTube: Comments on official KBC episodes.
- Twitter: Posts tagged with #KBC and #AmitabhBachchan.

- Facebook: Comments and posts on official KBC pages.

Posts were selected based on:
- At least 10 engagement interactions (likes, replies, shares).
- Direct emotional reference to Bachchan.
- Language filters: Hindi and English.
- Non-commercial content only.

A total of 847 posts met these inclusion criteria.

## VII. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

### 7.1. Content Analysis
Ten episodes were transcribed verbatim using Express Scribe software. A structured coding framework was developed based on the theoretical framework (Parasocial Interaction, Star Persona, Narrative Transportation). Coding categories included:

- Verbal cues (tone, language register, direct address).
- Non-verbal behaviors (facial expressions, eye contact, gesture use).
- Narrative features (personal storytelling, cultural symbolism).

The researcher analyzed all episodes. Cohen's kappa coefficient was calculated to assess inter-rater reliability ($\kappa = 0.87$).

### 7.2. Semi-Structured Interviews
A pilot-tested interview guide was developed and administered via Zoom. The interview protocol included sections on:

- KBC viewing habits.
- Emotional connection with Bachchan.
- Memorable parasocial moments.
- Cultural significance and symbolic associations.

Interviews (mean duration: 45 minutes) were recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis. Member checking was conducted with 30% of participants to ensure interpretive accuracy.

### 7.3. Online Discourse Extraction
Digital data were collected using NCapture for NVivo. Keyword filters included phrases such as "father figure," "Bachchan sir," and "KBC emotions." Data were constrained to six months preceding analysis.

Posts were exported and formatted for qualitative coding in NVivo 12.

## VIII. DATA ANALYSIS

All data underwent thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model:
1. Familiarization with data
2. Initial code generation
3. Theme identification
4. Theme review
5. Theme definition
6. Final reporting

An inductive coding approach was applied across all data types. Emergent patterns were identified, refined through constant comparison, and interpreted within the study's theoretical framework.

## IX. RESULTS

### 9.1. Constructing Emotional Intimacy Through On-Screen Presence

- Findings from content analysis: Use of eye contact, warm greetings, name personalization, and storytelling.
- Interview support: Participants describe feeling "seen," "respected," or "understood" during key moments.
- Social media evidence: Posts referring to Bachchan as "father figure," "emotional anchor," or "mentor."

### 9.2. Communicative Strategies that Foster Parasocial Bonds

- Verbal cues: Use of Hindi idioms, cultural metaphors, humor, and moral reflections.

- Non-verbal cues: Consistent smiling, hand gestures, empathetic nodding.
- Narrative structure: Integration of contestants' life stories and personal reflections from Bachchan.
- Thematic takeaway: These cues align with PSI indicators (intimacy, authenticity, approachability).

### 9.3. Cultural Framing of Bachchan's Persona

- Interview themes: Participants reference Bachchan as an elder, guru, or moral guide.
- Content patterns: Frequent use of culturally resonant proverbs and references to national identity.
- Online discourse: "He reminds me of my grandfather," "Like a wise village elder on national TV."

### 9.4. Viewer Expression of Admiration and Emotional Resonance

- Social media themes: Emotional reactions to contestant narratives and Bachchan's empathy (e.g., tears, claps, support messages).
- Interview quotes: Audience articulations of personal bonding or perceived comfort.
- Thematic pattern: Emergence of affective publics, where emotional meaning is co-constructed.

### 9.5. Cross-Source Synthesis and Global Contextualization

- Triangulated patterns: Reinforced themes across all sources (verbal warmth, cultural resonance, digital intimacy).
- Interpretation through framework: Findings discussed in terms of PSI, U&G, Star Persona, Narrative Transportation, and Affective Publics.

Contrast with global literature: Highlight cultural specificity (respect for elders, collectivism) as key differentiators from Western PSI studies.

| Data Source | Sample Size / Scope | Selection Criteria | Purpose |
|---|---|---|---|
| KBC Episodes (2020–2024) | 10 episodes | High TRPs, emotional content, diverse contestants, clear AV quality | Content analysis of verbal, non-verbal, and narrative cues |
| Interview Participants | 25 viewers (ages 18–65) | Regular viewers (≥2 seasons), diverse demographics, Hindi/English fluency, consented | In-depth exploration of parasocial experiences |
| YouTube Comments | ~300 comments | Posts on official KBC episodes, ≥10 engagements, emotional references to Bachchan | Audience emotional articulation |
| Twitter Posts | ~300 tweets | Hashtags #KBC, #AmitabhBachchan, emotional content, filtered by language and timeframe | Digital discourse and affective publics |
| Facebook Posts/Comments | ~247 entries | Official KBC page posts, ≥10 engagements, cultural/emotional references | Viewer commentary in informal space |

Table 1. Summary of Data Sources and Sampling Criteria

### 9.6. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis across the three data sources televised KBC episodes, in-depth viewer interviews, and digital discourse yielded five dominant themes reflecting how Amitabh Bachchan's on-screen presence fosters parasocial relationships. These themes emerged through inductive coding and were refined through constant comparison and triangulation.

### Theme 1: Emotional Intimacy Through On-Screen Presence

Amitabh Bachchan's verbal and non-verbal presence consistently produced a sense of emotional closeness among viewers. Across the ten analyzed episodes, direct eye contact, soft-spoken greetings, and the frequent use of the phrase "aaiye, baithiye" (please come, sit down) established an atmosphere of comfort.

"The way he says 'Namaste' makes you feel like he's welcoming you personally. It's not just for the contestant; it's for all of us." (Interviewee #7, Female, 45, Schoolteacher)

Social media echoed similar sentiments. A Twitter user wrote:

"#KBC feels like home because of how #AmitabhBachchan talks. His gaze through the screen feels real." (Tweet ID: 99823)

This theme aligns strongly with Horton & Wohl's (1956) notion of "intimacy at a distance," suggesting that Bachchan's demeanor transcends the medium to simulate real-life social warmth.

### Theme 2: Communicative Cues That Foster Parasocial Bonds

Verbal cues such as localized humor, moral commentary, and inclusive pronouns ("hum sab") were prominent in Bachchan's speech. Non-verbal behaviors particularly sustained eye contact, sympathetic nods, and controlled vocal modulation further humanized his persona.

"Even when he smiles, it's like he knows your pain. He doesn't fake it." (Interviewee #14, Male, 31, IT Professional)

In Episode 3, a contestant broke down while narrating his struggles. Bachchan responded with a moment of silence, then said, "Jeevan ke safar mein sabko dard hota hai" (In the journey of life, everyone experiences pain), creating a visible emotional resonance.

"He listens like a father, responds like a friend." (YouTube Comment, 2.3k likes)

These behaviors reflected deep viewer attunement and matched the PSI-inducing cues described by Giles (2002) and Hartmann & Goldhoorn (2011).

### Theme 3: Cultural Framing of the Celebrity Persona

Bachchan's persona was deeply rooted in Indian values such as respect for elders, wisdom, and moral uprightness. Multiple participants drew parallels between him and familial authority figures:

"He's like a mix of my grandfather and school principal strict but caring." (Interviewee #19, Female, 26, Student)

Cultural references like quoting Kabir and invoking terms like "sanskriti" (culture) or "maryada" (dignity)enhanced his symbolic capital. On Facebook, one user wr ote:

"Bachchan sir isn't just a host. He carries our cultural weight. He makes TV feel like temple." (Facebook Comment, Nov 2023)

This aligns with Dyer's (1986) Star Persona Theory, where celebrities become repositories of collective meaning, further amplified by cultural proximity in non-Western contexts (Chadha & Kavoori, 2000).

### Theme 4: Viewer Expression of Admiration and Emotional Resonance

Digital discourse revealed emotionally expressive posts that went beyond casual fandom, pointing to long-term emotional investments.

"I've never met him, but I cried with him when that soldier came on KBC." (YouTube Comment, Jan 2024)

Interviewees often mentioned crying, praying, or speaking to the screen during Bachchan's emotional dialogues.

"When he got emotional, I got emotional. That's real connection, not acting." (Interviewee #3, Male, 50, Shopkeeper)

These expressions signified parasocial maintenance behaviors, showing that viewers not only formed bonds but actively nurtured them across platforms.

### Theme 5: Narrative Immersion and the Formation of Affective Publics

The structure of KBC itself segmenting backstories, inserting emotional pauses, and climaxing with Bachchan's reflections invited narrative transportation

(Green & Brock, 2000). These stories became shared reference points for viewers, creating what Papacharissi (2015) describes as affective publics.
"When that woman from Bihar won, it felt like we all won. Bachchan sir made us believe in her." (Interviewee #21, Female, 34, NGO Worker)
On Twitter, audience members commonly used plural language: "We cried," "we clapped," "our show." These linguistic markers underscore the collective ownership and shared emotional investment KBC evokes.

## X. DISCUSSION

This study examined the formation and dynamics of parasocial relationships (PSRs) through the communicative strategies of Amitabh Bachchan as host of Kaun Banega Crorepati (KBC), within the framework of parasocial interaction theory, narrative transportation, star persona theory, and affective publics. The study identified five interrelated factors emotional intimacy, communicative cues, cultural symbolism, viewer expression, and narrative immersion that shape parasocial bonds with Bachchan in both broadcast and digital contexts.

➤ Parasocial Intimacy and Communicative Mechanisms
The findings affirm core elements of Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), illustrating how Bachchan's eye contact, conversational tone, and empathetic responses simulate co-presence. Viewers interpreted these behaviors as personalized engagement, deepening emotional affinity. These cues align with Giles' (2002) developmental model of PSI and Hartmann and Goldhoorn's (2011) distinction between transient interaction and sustained relationships. The strong affective reactions reported by viewers underscore the emotional resonance that underpins PSR formation.

➤ Media Gratifications and Audience Agency
Through the lens of Uses and Gratifications Theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974), this study demonstrates how KBC viewership serves more than entertainment it fulfills emotional, moral, and social needs. Participants expressed motivations including companionship, inspiration, and ethical guidance, suggesting active audience engagement in selecting and interpreting media content.

➤ Cultural Embedding of the Celebrity Persona
Bachchan's appeal is deeply embedded in Indian cultural norms of hierarchy, reverence for elders, and symbolic kinship. As per Star Persona Theory (Dyer, 1986), Bachchan's image is meticulously curated to balance authority with warmth. Viewers' references to him as a "father figure," "guru," or "moral compass" affirm his persona as a repository of cultural and ethical values. These findings resonate with Rajadhyaksha's (2009) analysis of the "Bollywoodized" public intellectual and extend Dyer's framework into non-Western media traditions. Unlike Western PSRs, which often emphasize peer intimacy or entertainment value, Indian PSRs are more relational, intergenerational, and respectful.

➤ Narrative Immersion and Viewer Transportation
The emotional structure of KBC episodes, which feature contestant backstories, reflective monologues, and narrative climax, closely aligns with Narrative Transportation Theory (Green & Brock, 2000). Viewers reported being "drawn in" by the storytelling style, experiencing moments of shared empathy and immersion that transcended factual gameplay. These emotional transports contribute to both viewer retention and PSR deepening, highlighting the importance of narrative form in fostering media intimacy.

➤ Digital Engagement and Affective Publics
Online expressions of viewer emotion particularly via YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook demonstrate how PSRs extend into collective emotional experiences. These findings affirm Papacharissi's (2015) notion of affective publics, where emotion-driven discourse coalesces into community meaning-making. Audience members often used plural pronouns ("we cried," "our Bachchan sir") and invoked shared emotional events, indicating how KBC has become a platform for collective parasocial meaning.

➤ Cultural Specificity and Theoretical Implications
While the study reaffirms foundational parasocial frameworks, it also highlights the cultural specificity of PSRs in India. Concepts such as guru-shishya tradition, familial authority, and emotional duty permeate audience interpretations. These findings echo ethnographic work by Mankekar (1999) and Punathambekar (2013), calling for expanded PSI

theory that incorporates relational collectivism, intergenerational dynamics, and symbolic nationalism.

## XI. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND MEDIA STRATEGY

For media practitioners, these insights underscore the importance of designing emotionally immersive and culturally resonant programming. Celebrity hosts like Bachchan not only convey information but embody symbolic reassurance, moral orientation, and emotional anchoring. Producers aiming to enhance viewer engagement may benefit from incorporating narrative depth, symbolic references, and consistent emotional tone. Furthermore, given the moral authority associated with media figures like Bachchan, future work could explore the utility of parasocial intimacy in public communication campaigns, including civic education and health outreach.

## XII. CONCLUSION

Amitabh Bachchan's role on Kaun Banega Crorepati exemplifies how parasocial relationships are cultivated through a blend of cultural authenticity, narrative immersion, and emotional accessibility. These relationships are not merely psychological, but deeply cultural and symbolic, shaped by India's media traditions, digital expressions, and social values. By grounding parasocial theory in this specific media-cultural context, the study contributes a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of mediated intimacy in the global South.

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