Parasocial Relationship and Emotion Regulation Among Adolescents

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***Abstract*—The rapid growth of social media platforms has led to a surge of influencers showcasing their talents and gaining large adolescent followings. With these influencers, numerous adolescents eventually build Parasocial Relationships (PSRs), which are one-sided ties that might impede emotional comprehension and control. The relationship between PSR and emotion regulation (ER) in adolescents was investigated in this study using quantitative measures. Purposive sampling was used to gather data from 51 males and 79 females. Spearman rank correlation revealed a moderately positive connection between PSR and ER. There was a positive correlation between PSR and all six ER dimensions. There were no discernible age or gender disparities in PSR. PSR was greatly impacted by social media usage, but not by platform type. To evaluate its effect on the emotional and social development of teenagers, it is essential to comprehend PSR-ER interactions.**

***Index Terms*—social media, social media influencers, adolescents, parasocial relationships, emotion regulation**

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"Facebook asks me what's on my mind. Twitter asks me what's going on. LinkedIn wants me to reconnect with my colleagues. And YouTube tells me what to watch. Social Media is no reality show or Big Brother. It's but a smothering mother!" — Ana Claudia Antunes.

Ana Claudia Antunes referred to social media as the "perfect mom" since it provides constant guidance, unattainable expectations, and recognition through "likes." 46% of urban teenagers in India use the internet for three to six hours per day, and 15% spend more than six hours (Minhas, 2023). Dr. Chabria observed effects such as teen hostility, sleep problems, and disturbed family time. Influencers are converting personal branding into a business, and platforms have moved from connection to profit. According to Al-Ansi et al. (2023), social media influencers (SMIs) at all levels, from nano to mega, have celebrity-like status and mostly draw in 12 to 18-year-olds. Teenagers develop one-sided emotional ties with influencers through Parasocial relationships (PSRs) (Gell et al., 2024). These connections feel genuine and have an impact on teen behaviour, self-perception, and purchasing patterns.

Horton and Wohl (1956) used the term "Parasocial Interaction" (PSI) to describe the appearance of in-person interactions between media personalities and viewers. These individuals—actors, hosts, or celebrities—create a feeling of intimacy that can develop into Parasocial relationships (PSRs), in which viewers experience a sense of personal connection even in the absence of actual interaction. PSIs create one-sided emotional ties by evoking feelings akin to those of real-life conversation. Subsequent research highlighted the psychological complexity of PSI by differentiating it from PSR. Three PSR categories were discovered by Giles and Maltby (2006): intense-personal (obsessive attachment), entertainment-social (adoration and conversation), and borderline-pathological (stalking or delusional fixation). These subtypes demonstrate how emotional control distinguishes between good admiration and unhealthy obsession.

Stein et al. (2022b) noted that Parasocial Interactions (PSIs) can be healthy, helping individuals learn skills or build routines, but Parasocial relationships (PSRs) can be harmful if they interfere with daily life, leading to aggression, impulsive spending, or restrictive dieting. PSRs affect adolescent behaviour and emotions. Gillespie and Beech (2016) defined emotion as a natural mental state, while emotion

regulation (ER) is controlling emotional responses. ER develops through neurobiology, temperament, and social influences. Erikson (1963) described adolescence as a stage for identity formation, which social media complicates by shaping self-perception and PSR intensity. PSRs can reduce loneliness but excessive attachment may isolate adolescents, showing both positive and negative effects on ER.

This study is important because it examines the little-studied relationship between Parasocial relationships (PSRs) and emotion regulation (ER). Although prior studies have demonstrated both beneficial and detrimental emotional impacts of PSRs, nothing is known about ER. Given the significant influence of online influencers on Indian youth, it is imperative to investigate the impact of PSRs on adolescents' emotional regulation. Future studies should look into the impact of social media usage frequency and incorporate a range of ages, cultures, and platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Teens between the ages of 12 and 17 could react differently than older groups. Determining if excessive media consumption maintains PSRs and has an impact on productivity can provide information about the emotional and academic health of adolescents.

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

Bond (2016) found that social media surveillance on Twitter strengthened PSRs among 316 adolescents, especially with interactive engagement. Al (2017) reported that female One Direction fans aged 11–15 developed PSIs through pseudo-friendship, empathy, and even pathological attachment. Su et al. (2021) observed that social attraction and positive comments on Instagram increased PSR intensity and perceived influencer credibility among 297 Taiwanese users. Liebers and Schramm (2021) highlighted empathy, identification, and similarity as key factors in adolescent PSRs. Hoffner and Bond (2022) noted PSRs can aid identity and emotional support but also foster unhealthy behaviours. Fazelirad and Noury Ghasem Abadi (2023) found emotion regulation difficulties correlated with celebrity worship, mediated by Instagram addiction.

Research on social media and adolescent emotional health highlights significant risks. Keleş et al. (2019) found that social media use, addiction, and social comparison in teens aged 13–18 were linked to anxiety, depression, and distress. Wartberg et al. (2021) reported problematic use among 1,221 youths (10–17) associated with poor impulse control, procrastination, and high stress. Gioia et al. (2021) noted a strong link between emotion dysregulation and problematic Internet use, suggesting excessive use as an emotional coping mechanism. Peker and Yıldız (2022) found that emotional reappraisal negatively correlated, while suppression positively correlated with social media addiction in 1,151 teens. Yıldız and Uslu (2023) showed that poor emotion regulation predicted Internet and smartphone addiction in 262 high school students, indicating dysfunctional ER drives addictive online behaviours.

II. METHODS

The study uses a cross-sectional correlational design, collecting participants' data at a single time point to examine the relationship between adolescents' PSRs and ER.

Hypothesis

H0 – There is no significant relationship between Parasocial Relationship and emotion regulation among adolescents.

H0 – There is no significant relationship with Parasocial Relationship and dimensions of emotion regulation among adolescents.

H0 – There is no gender difference in Parasocial Relationship among adolescents.

H0 – There is no age difference in Parasocial Relationship among adolescents.

H0 – There is no significant association between social media use and Parasocial Relationship among adolescents.

H0 - There is no significant association between social media platform and parasocial relationship among adolescents.

Population of the study

The study included 130 adolescents aged 12 to 17 who had actively followed one or more social media influencers for at least a year. The sample includes 51 boys and 79 girls, with 10 individuals aged 12–13, 51 aged 14–15, and 69 aged 16–17. Regarding social media usage, 55 people used it less than 1 hour, 58 used it 2–3 hours, and 20 used it more than 4 hours every day to see their favourite SMIs. In terms of platform preference, 21% utilized YouTube, 43%

used Instagram, and 36% used both channels to follow their influencers.

Tools for the study

The two questionnaires used in this study to gather information on the variables are the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (2004) and the Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale (2007). The scales have strong validity and reliability and can be tailored to any culture.

Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale (Bocarnea, 2011)

Bocarnea and Brown (2007) developed the 20-item Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale (CPPI) on a five-point Likert scale to measure Parasocial Interactions with celebrities or fictional characters. The scale shows high reliability (α = 0.80–0.90) and strong criterion-related validity. Factor analysis indicates that Parasocial Interaction can be measured as a single construct, and CPPI items reliably reflect identification with celebrities and personas.

Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (Gratz & Roemer, 2004)

Gratz and Roemer's (2004) clinically derived model of emotion regulation is measured using the 36-item Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) on a five-point Likert scale. It assesses six dimensions: lack of emotional awareness, lack of clarity, non-acceptance, and limited access to effective strategies, impulse control difficulties, and difficulty engaging in goal-directed behaviour during negative emotions. The DERS shows strong construct and predictive validity, high internal consistency (α = .76–.89), and acceptable test-retest reliability. Its six-factor structure was validated through exploratory factor analysis. Weinberg and Klonsky (2009) confirmed its psychometric properties in 428 adolescents aged 13–17.

Procedure of the study

An online survey that was disseminated via Gmail, Instagram, and WhatsApp using Google Forms was used to gather data. Adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 who had followed a favourite social media influencer for a minimum of a year were the participants. The purpose of the study, the researcher's contact information, and the inclusion/exclusion criteria were all provided in the form. Data privacy and confidentiality were maintained at all times. Participants' rights, anonymity, secrecy, privacy, and respect for values and views were among the ethical factors taken into account throughout data collecting. To preserve study integrity, safeguards against plagiarism and research misconduct were also put in place.

Shapiro-Wilk's Normality test, Spearman correlation, Mann-Whitney U test, and Kruskal-Wallis test are the statistical methods utilized to analyse the data. Additionally, data for inferential statistics and mean and standard deviation for descriptive statistics were analysed using SPSS software.

III. RESULTS

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of Parasocial Relationship (PSR) and Emotion Regulation (ER) (N = 130)

Descriptive	PSR	ER
Mean	66.9	102
Std. error mean	1.17	2.69
Standard deviation	13.4	30.7
Shapiro-Wilk Statistic	0.980	0.055(NS)
Statistic-Wilk Sig.	0.964	0.002(NS)

NS= Not significant, S= Significant, significant if p-value < 0.05

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the 130 participants, showing mean, median, and mode for PSR and ER. The standard deviations indicate values are close to the mean. Shapiro-Wilk's test revealed that PSR is not normally distributed, while ER is, so non-parametric tests were used for further analysis.

Table 2 Correlation of Parasocial Relationship (PSR) and Emotion Regulation (ER)

			PSR	ER
	PSR	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.589**
Spearman's rho		Sig. (2-tailed)	-	0.000
	ER	Correlation Coefficient	0.589**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	-

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 shows the Spearman correlation between PSR and ER, yielding a rho of 0.589 ($p < 0.001$), indicating a moderate positive correlation. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

Table 3 Correlation of the Parasocial Relationship (PSR) and dimensions of Emotion Regulation (ER)

Variables	PSR
Non-acceptance of emotional responses	0.519**
Difficulty engaging in goal-directed behaviour	0.467**
Impulse control difficulties	0.535**
Lack of emotional awareness	0.441**
Limited access to emotion regulation strategies	0.573**
Lack of emotional clarity	0.534**

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 3 shows Spearman correlations between PSR and the six ER dimensions, all of which have a moderate positive correlation with PSR at $p < 0.001$. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

Table 4 Mann-Whitney U test stating gender significance on Parasocial Relationship (PSR)

Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Female	79	66.43	5248.00		
				0.351	0.726
Male	51	64.06	3267		

Table 4 shows the Mann-Whitney U test results for gender differences in PSR (51 males, 79 females). No significant difference was found ($p > 0.05$), so the null hypothesis is accepted.

Table 5 Kruskal-Wallis test stating age significance on Parasocial Relationship (PSR)

Age	N	Mean Rank	H	Asymp. Sig.
12 – 13	10	76.65		
14 – 15	51	66.53	1.190	0.552
16 - 17	69	63.12		

Table 5 shows the Kruskal-Wallis test results for age groups (12–13, 14–15, 16–17 years), indicating no significant impact on PSR ($p > 0.05$). The null hypothesis is accepted.

Table 6 Kruskal-Wallis test stating significance of social media use on Parasocial Relationship (PSR)

Social Media Use	N	Mean Rank	H	Asymp. Sig.
Less than 1 hour	54	54.34		
2 -3 hours	57	68.24	12.446	0.002*
More than 4 hours	19	89.00		

Table 6 shows that social media use over 4 hours daily significantly impacts PSR ($p < 0.05$), with the highest mean rank, leading to rejection of the null hypothesis.

Table 7 Kruskal-Wallis test stating significance of social media platform on Parasocial Relationship (PSR)

Social Media Platform	N	Mean Rank	H	Asymp. Sig.
Youtube	27	67.57		
Instagram	56	67.51	0.668	0.716
Both	47	61.91		

Table 7 shows no significant impact of social media platforms on PSR ($p > 0.05$), so the null hypothesis is accepted.

IV. DISCUSSION

According to a poll conducted in September 2023, 46% of urban Indian parents stated their kids used social media, over-the-top (OTT) content, and online gaming for three to six hours per day, and 15% said they used it for more than six hours (Minhas, 2023). The majority of teenagers in this study had moderate levels of Parasocial relationships (PSRs) and a favourite social media influencer (SMI). The developmental stage of teens, where identity formation and social connection are crucial, may be the cause of this predominance. Media personalities frequently act as role models, providing direction or motivation. These relationships provide them a sense of intimacy and belonging despite being one-sided.

The high frequency of Parasocial Relationships (PSRs) among teenagers may be explained by their resemblance to actual social interactions. According to Perse and Rubin (1989), PSRs provide companionship and are similar to friendships since teenagers frequently assess social media influencers (SMIs) according to the same standards they use for true friends. These relationships feel sincere and emotionally satisfying even when they are one-sided. PSR formation is also influenced by attachment style; Ballantine (2005) discovered that avoidant people were less likely to form strong PSRs than anxious-ambivalent people. This implies that teenagers' perceived intimacy with SMIs is influenced by their emotional needs and attachment styles.

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) and emotion regulation (ER) as well as PSR and all six ER characteristics were found to have a somewhat favourable association using Spearman's correlation. This implies that teenagers who experience a sense of camaraderie with social media influencers (SMIs) expend more emotional energy, which may result in undesirable coping mechanisms like avoidance or idealization. Emotional dysregulation and excessive internet use may result from such strong attachments taking the place of genuine connections. Negative self-comparisons are fostered by continuous exposure to idealized online lives, which negatively impacts mental health and self-esteem (Gabriel et al., 2023). In a similar vein, Rad et al. (2023) discovered a connection between poor emotion management and celebrity worship, which was mediated by Instagram addiction. These results demonstrate how adolescents' capacity to regulate their emotions on their own may be hampered by reliance on PSRs.

There was no apparent gender disparity in Parasocial relationships (PSRs) between males and girls, according to the Mann-Whitney U test. This could be because of the small sample size and unbalanced gender ratio, indicating the need for further extensive research to validate these results. The outcome is in contrast to previous studies showing that boys frequently perceive PSR figures as more agent-like (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990), whereas girls show stronger PSRs because of greater empathy and emotionality (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). The inclusion of influencers from a variety of areas rather than particular competence groups may be the reason for the lack of gender difference in this case. However, within the past year, both sexes had comparable social media exposure and regular interaction with their favourite influencers.

Due to unequal group distribution and widespread access to social media information, the Kruskal-Wallis test revealed that age (12–17 years) had no significant impact on PSR, suggesting that all adolescents' age groups are capable of forming PSRs. However, social media use was significant; those

who used it for more than four hours a day had the highest PSR, which supports research showing that excessive media use can raise PSRs and have an adverse effect on mental health (Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013). Additionally, the test showed no significance depending on the platform—YouTube, Instagram, or both—indicating that PSR development is not platform-specific. Overuse of platforms facilitates greater engagement with influencers, which may result in negative social media behaviours and procrastination. The non-significance can be explained by the fact that the majority of participants utilized YouTube and Instagram and very few used other sites. In general, usage length has a greater impact on PSR than platform type or age.

V. CONCLUSION

Relationships with social media influencers can now be explained by Horton and Wohl's (1956) theory of parasocial phenomena, which initially concentrated on radio and television. Adolescents' character development and mood management, as well as their behaviours and cognitive processes, can be greatly impacted by social media and PSR exposure. Binge-watching or obsessively following influencers can have a detrimental effect on coping mechanisms and mental health. Researching this phenomenon is crucial because prolonged scrolling might exacerbate anxiety and procrastination.

There are a number of limitations to this study that should be taken into account. The length of the questionnaire may have led to bias in participant responses. Longitudinal insights were limited by the time limits imposed by its cross-sectional nature. Generalizability was impacted by the sample size's small size and unequal distribution. Furthermore, data collection was limited to PSRs on YouTube and Instagram; other platforms were not included.

Future research should employ a variety of data collection techniques because the study depended on self-reported data. Deeper insights can be obtained by including qualitative measures. Future research should look at PSRs on social media sites other than YouTube and Instagram, and studies with bigger, gender-balanced samples are advised.

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