



**Parasocial Relationships in the Age of Digital Influencers: Psychological Mechanisms,
Commercial Exploitation, and Implications for Audience Well-Being**

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the psychological mechanisms underlying digital parasocial relationships, the commercial exploitation of parasocial bonds in the influencer marketing industry, and the implications for audience well-being in an era of algorithmic content curation and virtual influencers. Drawing on Horton and Wohl's (1956) foundational theory of parasocial interaction, extended through Dibble, Hartmann, and Rosaen's (2016) conceptual refinements, Tukachinsky and Stever's (2019) expanded relational model, and Banet-Weiser's (2012) analysis of commodified authenticity, the study analyzes how the technical affordances of social media platforms have qualitatively transformed parasocial dynamics from the one-sided broadcast-era phenomenon into a commercially exploited, psychologically consequential relational ecosystem operating at unprecedented scale. Synthesizing recent empirical evidence including Liebers and Schramm's (2024) systematic review of 281 parasocial interaction studies and Breves et al.'s (2025) longitudinal comparison of human and virtual influencer relationships, the paper identifies five transformative shifts in digital parasocial dynamics and documents their well-being consequences across domains including social comparison, body image disturbance, compulsive engagement, and parasocial breakup distress. The analysis reveals that existing regulatory frameworks focused primarily on advertising disclosure requirements are

fundamentally insufficient to address the structural conditions enabling parasocial exploitation, particularly for vulnerable populations including children and adolescents. The paper proposes a comprehensive governance framework integrating age-specific protections, virtual influencer transparency requirements, platform design obligations, and ethical standards for influencer practice.

Keywords: parasocial relationships, influencer marketing, audience well-being, commercial exploitation, virtual influencers, parasocial interaction theory, social comparison, digital media effects, algorithmic curation, media governance.

Introduction

The concept of parasocial interaction, first theorized by Horton and Wohl in their seminal 1956 article in the journal *Psychiatry*, described the one-sided relationships that audiences develop with media performers, relationships characterized by feelings of intimacy, familiarity, and emotional connection despite the absence of genuine reciprocal interaction. Originally developed to explain the bonds that television viewers formed with news anchors, talk show hosts, and soap opera characters, the concept has undergone dramatic reconceptualization in the age of social media influencers, who cultivate direct, seemingly reciprocal relationships with audiences through comments, direct messages, live streams, question-and-answer sessions, and interactive content formats that create unprecedented illusions of mutual engagement and personal connection. The emergence of digital influencer culture has transformed parasocial relationships from a peripheral media phenomenon into a central organizing principle of the contemporary attention economy, with implications extending across psychology, marketing, media studies, and public policy.

The digital transformation of parasocial relationships represents far more than a quantitative intensification of an established media phenomenon; it constitutes a qualitative restructuring of the mediated intimacy that Horton and Wohl originally described. This restructuring is driven by three fundamental shifts in the media environment: the technical affordances of social media platforms that enable bidirectional communication between creators and audiences, dissolving the strict one-sidedness of broadcast-era parasociality; the algorithmic curation systems that embed influencer content within the ambient flow of users' daily social media consumption, naturalizing parasocial encounters within interpersonal communication contexts; and the commercial architecture of influencer marketing that systematically exploits

parasocial bonds for profit, creating financial incentives for the deliberate cultivation and intensification of audience emotional attachment. Together, these shifts have produced an ecosystem in which parasocial relationships are simultaneously more psychologically intense, more commercially valuable, and more ethically consequential than anything Horton and Wohl could have anticipated.

Recent empirical research has documented both the scope and the significance of digital parasocial relationships with increasing rigor and sophistication. Liebers and Schramm's (2024) systematic review of 281 studies on parasocial interactions published between 2016 and 2020 in *Frontiers in Psychology* confirmed that parasocial relationships significantly mediate influencer marketing effectiveness, audience loyalty, and content engagement across diverse demographic groups and cultural contexts. The review identified parasocial relationships as the single strongest predictor of influencer marketing effectiveness, surpassing traditional advertising metrics including brand awareness and message recall. Breves, Ammann, Heidenreich, Liebers, and Schramm's (2025) four-week experience sampling study with 185 participants, published in *Media Psychology*, demonstrated that parasocial relationships develop with comparable intensity and through similar psychological mechanisms for both human and virtual influencers, a finding with profound implications for the emerging field of artificial intelligence-generated content creators and the authenticity expectations that underpin the influencer marketing industry.

This paper critically examines the psychological mechanisms underlying digital parasocial relationships, the commercial exploitation of parasocial bonds in the influencer marketing ecosystem, and the implications for audience well-being, particularly among younger audiences who constitute the primary demographic for influencer content consumption. Three interconnected research questions guide the analysis: First, how do the technical affordances of social media platforms transform the psychological mechanisms of parasocial relationship formation compared to broadcast media contexts? Second, through what mechanisms does the influencer marketing industry exploit parasocial bonds for commercial purposes, and what ethical concerns does this exploitation raise for consumer protection and audience autonomy? Third, what are the documented psychological effects of digital parasocial relationships on audience well-being, and what governance frameworks are needed to address the identified harms while preserving the legitimate social benefits that parasocial connections can provide?

Theoretical Foundations: From Broadcasting to Interactive Parasociality

Classical Parasocial Interaction Theory and Its Conceptual Evolution

Horton and Wohl's (1956) original formulation described parasocial interaction as an illusory experience of face-to-face relationship created by media performers who address audiences directly, use conversational language and gestures, maintain eye contact with the camera, and simulate the intimacy markers characteristic of interpersonal communication. The theory was developed in the specific technological context of mid-twentieth-century television, where the medium's visual and auditory immediacy, particularly in genres such as talk shows, news broadcasts, and variety programs, created uniquely favorable conditions for audience identification with and emotional attachment to performers. Horton and Wohl emphasized that parasocial interaction represented a normal and generally adaptive extension of human social behavior rather than a pathological substitute for genuine relationships, a position that has been largely vindicated by decades of subsequent research demonstrating the universality, cultural pervasiveness, and generally adaptive nature of parasocial bonds across diverse media contexts and audience populations.

The theoretical development of parasocial interaction theory proceeded through several important stages following its initial articulation. Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) developed the first validated Parasocial Interaction Scale, providing a reliable measurement instrument that facilitated quantitative empirical research and established significant links between parasocial interaction intensity and variables including media exposure duration, perceived realism of media content, and audience satisfaction with media experiences. Their work established that parasocial relationships develop through the same general social-cognitive mechanisms as interpersonal relationships, including perceived similarity, physical attractiveness, social attraction, and repeated exposure, suggesting that parasocial bond formation reflects fundamental human social cognition rather than a distinct psychological process unique to mediated contexts.

Dibble, Hartmann, and Rosaen (2016) addressed persistent conceptual confusion in the parasocial literature by rigorously distinguishing parasocial interaction, defined as the momentary, during-exposure experience of imagined reciprocity with a media performer, from parasocial relationship, defined as the enduring, cross-situational emotional bond that persists between media exposures and may develop in intensity over time through repeated parasocial

interactions. This conceptual distinction carries important implications for understanding digital parasocial dynamics, where the continuous availability of influencer content through algorithmically curated social media feeds fundamentally blurs the boundary between discrete interaction episodes and ongoing relational experience. In the broadcast era, parasocial interactions were temporally bounded by program schedules; in the social media era, they are potentially continuous, embedded within the unstructured flow of daily digital media consumption.

Schramm and Hartmann's (2008) two-factor model further refined the construct by identifying cognitive and affective components of parasocial interaction, with the affective dimension, encompassing feelings of sympathy, empathy, and emotional closeness, proving significantly more predictive of parasocial relationship formation and behavioral outcomes than the cognitive dimension, which encompasses attention, comprehension, and mental elaboration. This finding has been replicated across multiple studies and carries practical implications for influencer marketing: content strategies that activate emotional responses, including personal vulnerability, humor, moral outrage, and aspirational lifestyle display, are more effective at building parasocial bonds than purely informational or educational content.

Tukachinsky and Stever (2019) proposed an expanded parasocial relationship model incorporating four relational dimensions that parallel the multidimensional structure of interpersonal relationships: perceived friendship, characterized by feelings of companionship, mutual understanding, and shared interests; empathetic concern, involving emotional investment in the media figure's well-being and experiences; companionship, reflecting the sense that the media figure provides reliable social presence and reduces feelings of loneliness; and attraction, encompassing physical, social, and intellectual admiration. This multidimensional conceptualization is particularly relevant to digital influencer contexts, where different content types strategically cultivate different relational dimensions: personal vlogs foster perceived friendship through intimate self-disclosure; charitable campaigns and vulnerability narratives activate empathetic concern through emotional storytelling; daily routine content and ambient social media presence create companionship through consistent relational availability; and aspirational lifestyle content generates attraction and admiration through curated self-presentation.

The Digital Transformation of Parasocial Mechanisms

The social media environment has transformed parasocial relationships in five fundamental ways that collectively represent a qualitative shift rather than merely a quantitative intensification of broadcast-era dynamics. The first transformation concerns bidirectional communication affordances. Social media platforms enable audiences to comment on, respond to, and directly interact with influencer content through comments, direct messages, live stream chat, polls, question-and-answer features, and collaborative content formats such as TikTok's duet and stitch functions. These technical affordances create experiences of reciprocal engagement that fundamentally blur the traditional one-sidedness of parasocial relationships as Horton and Wohl conceived them. When an influencer responds to a follower's comment, mentions them by name during a live stream, incorporates their content suggestion, or shares their message, the follower experiences a moment of genuine reciprocity within what remains a structurally asymmetric relationship where the influencer maintains thousands or millions of such connections simultaneously.

The second transformation involves temporal density and multi-platform immersion. The continuous, multi-platform presence of contemporary influencers, who may post daily across Instagram Stories, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter or X, personal blogs, newsletters, and podcast platforms, creates an immersive relational environment of unprecedented frequency and informational richness. Followers may encounter an influencer's morning routine on Instagram Stories at breakfast, their opinion on a trending topic on Twitter during their commute, their long-form personal reflection on YouTube during lunch, and their sponsored product recommendation on TikTok in the evening, all within a single day. This multi-platform saturation creates a sense of intimate familiarity with the influencer's daily life, personality, values, habits, relationships, and emotional states that far exceeds the relational knowledge available through traditional media exposure, which was temporally bounded by scheduled broadcast appearances within specific program contexts.

The third transformation concerns algorithmic embedding of parasocial content within interpersonal communication contexts. The algorithmic curation of social media feeds means that audiences encounter influencer content not through deliberate, conscious media selection but through algorithmic recommendation, embedded within feeds that also contain posts from friends, family members, colleagues, and acquaintances. This architectural feature creates a psychological context in which parasocial and interpersonal social relationships occupy the same

informational environment, potentially reducing the cognitive distinction between mediated and genuine connections. Rasmussen's (2018) research on parasocial relationships in social media contexts found evidence that this algorithmic embedding enhances the perceived naturalness and closeness of parasocial relationships by placing them within what audiences experience as an interpersonal social communication environment rather than a distinct media consumption context.

The fourth transformation involves performative authenticity and identity-based identification. The distinctive cultural logic of influencer content, which emphasizes the deliberate cultivation of an apparently unfiltered, genuine, and relatable persona, activates psychological mechanisms of trust and identification that differ qualitatively from those engaged by traditional media performers. Whereas television personalities were generally understood to be performing professional roles within institutional media contexts, influencers present themselves as ordinary people sharing authentic lived experiences, creating conditions for audience identification based on perceived similarity and shared identity rather than aspiration and admiration alone. Banet-Weiser's (2012) analysis of brand culture revealed how this perception of authenticity, whether genuine or strategically manufactured, facilitates parasocial bond formation through the converging psychological mechanisms of similarity attraction, self-disclosure reciprocity norms, and social identity theory.

The fifth transformation concerns expectations of relational availability and the variable reinforcement of parasocial reciprocity. The apparent accessibility and approachability of influencers, cultivated through invitation to direct message, ask me anything sessions, and responsive community management, creates audience expectations of relational availability that have no precedent in broadcast media contexts. Followers may expect responses to comments, personalized acknowledgment in live streams, and genuine engagement through direct messages. These expectations are intermittently reinforced through selective engagement, creating anticipation cycles similar to the variable-ratio reinforcement schedules identified in behavioral psychology as particularly effective at maintaining persistent engagement behavior and creating habit-forming patterns of checking, scrolling, and interaction.

Virtual Influencers and the Boundaries of Parasocial Connection

The emergence of virtual influencers, computer-generated characters with social media presences, brand partnerships, and follower communities numbering in the millions, represents a

particularly significant theoretical challenge for parasocial interaction theory. Characters such as Lil Miquela, created by the technology company Brud and later acquired by Dapper Labs, accumulated over three million Instagram followers and secured partnerships with luxury brands including Prada, Calvin Klein, and Samsung, demonstrating that parasocial relationships can form with entities that have no biological existence, no autonomous consciousness, no genuine emotions, and no capacity for authentic reciprocal interaction. The success of virtual influencers reveals that the psychological processes underlying parasocial bond formation respond to perceived social presence and the outward markers of personality rather than requiring knowledge of or connection to an actual human being behind the digital persona.

Breves, Ammann, Heidenreich, Liebers, and Schramm's (2025) experience sampling study provided the first rigorous longitudinal evidence that parasocial relationships with virtual influencers develop through similar psychological mechanisms and achieve comparable emotional intensity to those formed with human influencers over a four-week observation period involving 185 participants. This finding has profound implications for understanding the fundamental nature of parasocial relationships and their susceptibility to commercial exploitation. If audiences form emotionally significant bonds with entities that are entirely commercial constructions, designed by marketing agencies to maximize engagement, voiced and scripted by copywriters to optimize relatability, and iteratively refined through A/B testing and audience data analysis, then the ethical responsibilities of those who create, control, and commercially exploit these entities become particularly acute and urgent.

Commercial Exploitation of Parasocial Bonds in Influencer Marketing

The Business Architecture of Parasocial Monetization

The global influencer marketing industry, valued at \$21.1 billion in 2023 and growing at approximately 14% annually, is fundamentally constructed upon the systematic commercial exploitation of parasocial relationships. The industry's entire business model depends on the psychological transfer of parasocial trust from the influencer-follower relationship to the influencer-brand-follower commercial transaction: when influencers recommend products, share discount codes, or feature sponsored content, the recommendation is processed by audiences not as conventional advertising, which consumers have developed extensive resistance and skepticism toward, but as a personal endorsement from a trusted intimate, even though the

recommendation is commercially motivated, contractually obligated, and financially compensated at rates ranging from hundreds to millions of dollars depending on the influencer's following and engagement metrics.

The commercial architecture of parasocial exploitation operates through several interconnected mechanisms that are designed to minimize audience awareness of commercial motivation while maximizing the persuasive impact of parasocial trust. Product integration embeds promotional content seamlessly within the personal narrative of the influencer's daily life, making the commercial message structurally inseparable from the relational context that gives it persuasive power: an influencer shares their morning routine and naturally includes a sponsored skincare product, discusses their fitness journey while wearing a branded activewear partnership, or describes their travel experience while subtly promoting a paid hotel collaboration. The integration of commercial content within personal narrative exploits the parasocial relationship by leveraging the trust, identification, and emotional attachment that followers have developed through sustained relational engagement.

Affiliate marketing structures create ongoing financial incentives for the continuous cultivation and exploitation of parasocial trust by compensating influencers based directly on follower purchasing behavior, typically through percentage commissions on sales generated via personalized tracking links, custom discount codes, or branded storefronts. This commission-based model means that the influencer's financial interest is directly and continuously tied to their ability to convert parasocial trust into measurable consumer behavior, creating persistent incentives for product promotion regardless of product quality, suitability for the influencer's audience, or alignment with the values and lifestyle the influencer has constructed as the basis of their parasocial appeal. The personalized tracking mechanisms embedded in affiliate marketing infrastructure also enable detailed monitoring of individual follower purchasing patterns, potentially enabling targeted exploitation of the most parasocially invested and commercially responsive audience members.

Disclosure requirements, mandated by the Federal Trade Commission in the United States, the Advertising Standards Authority in the United Kingdom, and equivalent regulatory bodies across jurisdictions, require influencers to clearly label sponsored content to enable audiences to recognize commercial motivation and adjust their trust accordingly. However, extensive empirical research consistently demonstrates that disclosure labels have limited

moderating effects on audience perceptions of credibility, trust, and purchase intention, particularly when disclosures are brief, visually inconspicuous, positioned at the end of content after persuasive exposure has already occurred, or embedded within hashtags that audiences may not distinguish from organic content markers. The limited effectiveness of disclosure-based consumer protection highlights the need for more structural approaches to governing parasocial exploitation.

Vulnerability of Children and Adolescent Audiences

Children and adolescents represent a particularly vulnerable population within the parasocial exploitation ecosystem, and their protection constitutes one of the most urgent governance challenges in the influencer marketing landscape. Developmental psychology research demonstrates that children's capacity for critical evaluation of mediated content develops gradually throughout childhood and adolescence, their susceptibility to social comparison and social influence is heightened during the identity-formation period of adolescence, their understanding of commercial motivation and persuasive intent in media content is limited before approximately age twelve, and their financial literacy and consumer protection awareness remain underdeveloped well into late adolescence. These developmental characteristics create conditions for parasocial exploitation that existing regulatory frameworks, designed primarily for traditional advertising contexts featuring clear boundaries between editorial and commercial content, inadequately address.

De Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson's (2019) systematic review of research on influencer marketing targeting children documented that children as young as six years old develop parasocial relationships with YouTube influencers and that these relationships significantly influence product preferences, brand attitudes, and purchase requests directed at parents. Subsequent experimental studies have confirmed that children experience substantial difficulty distinguishing sponsored content from organic content in influencer posts, even when standard disclosure labels are present and prominently positioned, and that parasocial relationships with influencers strengthen children's positive attitudes toward promoted products and brands beyond the persuasive effects of traditional advertising, which children develop some resistance to through advertising literacy education. These findings suggest that the commercial exploitation of parasocial relationships with young audiences constitutes a form of commercial manipulation that systematically exploits developmental vulnerabilities for profit.

The phenomenon of kidfluencers, children who, typically managed by parents or guardians, create social media content and build large followings that are subsequently monetized through brand partnerships and advertising revenue, raises particularly acute ethical concerns that existing governance frameworks do not adequately address. Crystal Abidin's extensive research program has documented how children's parasocial appeal to young audiences is commercially leveraged by parents and management agencies, creating situations in which children's developmental experiences, spontaneous emotional expressions, family interactions, and personal narratives are systematically commodified for commercial purposes without the child's informed consent, meaningful understanding of commercial implications, or protection by the employment regulations that historically governed child performers in traditional entertainment industries.

Psychological Well-Being Implications of Digital Parasocial Relationships

Social Comparison, Body Image, and Self-Esteem Effects

The psychological consequences of digital parasocial relationships for audience well-being have received growing empirical attention, with research identifying both beneficial and harmful effects that vary systematically by relationship intensity, audience demographic characteristics, content type, and individual vulnerability factors. Social comparison theory, as originally formulated by Festinger (1954) and extensively applied to media contexts by subsequent scholars, predicts that exposure to idealized representations of others' lives, bodies, achievements, and material circumstances triggers upward social comparisons that can diminish self-esteem, body satisfaction, life satisfaction, and subjective well-being. The parasocial dimension of digital influencer engagement intensifies these comparison effects through a mechanism that distinguishes them from celebrity comparisons in traditional media: because audiences perceive influencers as accessible, relatable, and fundamentally similar to themselves, the standards of comparison they establish feel simultaneously achievable and yet remain perpetually out of reach for most followers, creating a particularly psychologically corrosive form of relative deprivation and aspirational frustration.

Body image research has documented significant and consistent associations between influencer content exposure and body dissatisfaction, particularly among young women and girls. Fardouly, Willburger, and Vartanian's (2018) experimental research found that exposure to

fitspiration content on Instagram increased body dissatisfaction and negative mood compared to control conditions and that these effects were mediated by appearance-related upward social comparisons. Tiggemann and Anderberg (2020) extended these findings to influencer-specific content, demonstrating that even purportedly body-positive influencer content produced mixed effects, reducing certain forms of explicit body dissatisfaction while simultaneously increasing overall attention to and preoccupation with physical appearance, suggesting that the body-positive movement within influencer culture may inadvertently maintain the centrality of bodily appearance as an evaluative framework rather than genuinely shifting attention toward non-appearance-based self-evaluation.

Mental Health, Compulsive Engagement, and Parasocial Breakup

The relationship between intensive parasocial engagement and mental health outcomes presents a complex bidirectional picture that resists simple characterization as either beneficial or harmful. On one hand, parasocial relationships demonstrably provide genuine psychological benefits for certain populations and in certain circumstances: social support and companionship for socially isolated individuals, identity exploration resources for adolescents navigating developmental transitions, community connection through shared fandom and parasocial group identification, and emotional regulation support through content that provides comfort, humor, or perspective. Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic documented significant positive associations between parasocial engagement with content creators and subjective well-being during lockdown periods, suggesting that parasocial relationships served meaningful compensatory social functions when interpersonal contact was restricted by public health measures.

On the other hand, intensive parasocial engagement, particularly when it functions as a primary rather than supplementary source of social connection or when it is driven by compulsive checking behavior rather than volitional media selection, has been associated with a range of problematic psychological outcomes. These include social media addiction symptoms, characterized by loss of control over usage, preoccupation with influencer content, withdrawal symptoms when access is restricted, and continued engagement despite awareness of negative consequences; compulsive checking behavior driven by variable reinforcement schedules embedded in platform notification architecture; anticipatory anxiety about influencer responses and acknowledgment; distress responses to changes in influencer content direction, platform

migration, or relationship dynamics; and parasocial breakup experiences that mirror the emotional dynamics of interpersonal relationship dissolution, including grief, anger, rumination, and active coping strategies.

The Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health's 2024 study documented alarming mental health outcomes among content creators themselves, with one in ten reporting suicidal ideation related to their professional work and sixty-five percent reporting that performance obsession negatively impacted their mental health, but the parallel mental health implications for audiences who invest significant emotional resources in parasocial relationships with these creators have received comparatively less systematic empirical attention. Cohen's (2003) foundational work on parasocial breakup demonstrated that the emotional responses to parasocial relationship loss parallel those observed in interpersonal relationship dissolution research, and the digital influencer context introduces novel dimensions of parasocial disruption including platform migration that severs access to the parasocial partner, algorithmic changes that invisibly reduce content visibility and thereby attenuate the relationship without either party's awareness, and authenticity scandals that retroactively reframe the emotional investment as having been directed toward a fabricated persona.

Cross-Cultural Dimensions and Global Perspectives

The cross-cultural dimensions of digital parasocial relationships remain significantly underexplored in the existing literature, which is disproportionately focused on Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic populations despite the fact that the majority of social media users and the fastest-growing influencer markets are located in the Global South. Cultural variation in several psychologically relevant dimensions, including the theoretical distinction between independent and interdependent self-construals, cultural norms governing the expression and recognition of intimacy across relational contexts, collectivist versus individualist orientations toward social identity formation, and culturally specific consumer socialization practices, suggests that parasocial relationship formation, subjective experience, behavioral consequences, and commercial exploitation dynamics may differ meaningfully across cultural contexts in ways that the predominantly Western empirical literature has not yet adequately documented.

Abidin's (2018) pioneering research on influencer culture in Southeast Asia documented culturally distinct dynamics including the concept of calibrated amateurism, whereby influencers

strategically deploy markers of amateur production quality to enhance perceived authenticity within cultural contexts where polished self-presentation may signal inauthenticity rather than professionalism, and practices of strategic relatability adapted to specific cultural norms about social hierarchy, deference, and the appropriate display of material success. In collectivist cultural contexts, where social identity is more closely tied to group membership and where relational harmony and social obligation are particularly valued, parasocial relationships may serve different psychological functions, carry different social meanings, and be embedded within different commercial practices than in the individualist contexts that dominate the existing literature.

The Global South dimensions of parasocial exploitation deserve particular scholarly and regulatory attention given that many of the world's fastest-growing influencer markets, including India, Brazil, Indonesia, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Mexico, are located in countries where consumer protection frameworks are less developed, digital literacy levels are lower among significant population segments, and the economic aspirations driving both content creation and content consumption may create heightened vulnerability to commercial exploitation through parasocial channels. Research addressing these contexts is urgently needed to inform governance frameworks that are culturally appropriate, sensitive to local media ecosystem dynamics, and responsive to the specific vulnerability profiles of diverse global audience populations.

Governance Frameworks and Ethical Recommendations

Beyond Disclosure: Toward Structural Approaches to Parasocial Protection

The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that existing regulatory frameworks addressing influencer marketing are fundamentally inadequate to address the structural dynamics of parasocial exploitation. Current regulatory approaches focus overwhelmingly on disclosure requirements, mandating that influencers label sponsored content to enable audiences to recognize commercial motivation and adjust their evaluative frameworks accordingly. While disclosure requirements represent a necessary regulatory baseline, they are insufficient for several interconnected reasons. First, empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that disclosure labels have limited moderating effects on audience trust perceptions and purchasing behavior, particularly among younger audiences and in relational contexts where strong parasocial bonds override the skepticism that disclosure is intended to activate. Second,

disclosure requirements address only explicit, contracted sponsorship arrangements, leaving unaddressed the broader commercial architecture of parasocial exploitation that extends to affiliate marketing, platform monetization, strategic community cultivation for future commercial leverage, and the commodification of authenticity itself as a marketable parasocial resource.

A more comprehensive governance framework should integrate multiple regulatory dimensions. First, age-specific protections that build upon existing child advertising regulations but are specifically adapted to the influencer marketing context should restrict the types and intensity of commercial content that can be directed to audiences below specified age thresholds through parasocial channels. These protections should include limitations on the frequency of sponsored content in child-targeted influencer accounts, prohibitions on certain product categories in parasocially mediated marketing to minors, and requirements for age-appropriate commercial literacy education integrated into platform interfaces. Second, virtual influencer transparency requirements should mandate clear, prominent, and persistent disclosure that a social media persona is computer-generated rather than representing a real human being, enabling audiences to make informed decisions about the relational and emotional investment they direct toward non-human entities specifically designed to maximize parasocial engagement for commercial purposes.

Third, platform design obligations should require social media companies to implement features that support audience awareness of the commercial dimensions of influencer content and the structurally asymmetric nature of parasocial relationships. These might include contextual information about an influencer's sponsorship history displayed alongside promoted content, tools that enable users to track their own parasocial engagement intensity and set self-regulatory boundaries, and algorithmic modifications that reduce the concentration of parasocially exploitative content in feeds of vulnerable users identified through behavioral signals. Fourth, comprehensive kidfluencer protection legislation should establish clear working hour limitations, earnings protection through trust or escrow arrangements, informed consent requirements adapted to developmental capacities, and regulatory oversight mechanisms for commercially active accounts featuring minor children.

Ethical Frameworks for Responsible Influencer Practice

Beyond regulatory compliance, the ethical dimensions of parasocial exploitation require attention from influencers themselves, from the talent management agencies and marketing technology platforms that support and facilitate influencer commercial activity, and from the consumer brands that commission and fund influencer marketing campaigns. An ethical framework for responsible influencer practice should incorporate four interconnected principles. Relational responsibility acknowledges that parasocial relationships, while structurally asymmetric and commercially motivated, involve genuine emotional investment by audiences that creates ethical obligations for influencers to avoid deliberate emotional manipulation, exploitation of psychological vulnerability, and deceptive cultivation of intimacy for purely commercial purposes. Commercial transparency extends beyond minimum regulatory disclosure requirements to encompass honest and proactive communication about the economic relationships structuring influencer content, the frequency and financial significance of brand partnerships, and the degree to which content is commercially motivated versus organically generated by genuine personal interest and experience.

Audience vulnerability awareness requires influencers and their management teams to actively consider the psychological impact of content on vulnerable audience segments, implementing content sensitivity practices that account for younger followers, individuals experiencing mental health challenges, audiences in financial distress who may be susceptible to promoted consumption, and followers who may be relying on the parasocial relationship as a primary source of social connection and emotional support. Authenticity integrity, the fourth principle, requires that the persona presented to audiences bears a meaningful and honest relationship to the influencer's actual experiences, values, opinions, and lifestyle, avoiding the systematic fabrication of relatable narratives, the concealment of professional management and strategic content planning, and the misrepresentation of sponsored experiences as organic personal choices, practices that constitute a fundamental breach of the trust relationship upon which parasocial bonds depend.

Discussion and Future Research Directions

This paper has examined the transformation of parasocial relationships in the age of digital influencers across four interconnected dimensions: psychological mechanisms, commercial exploitation dynamics, well-being implications, and governance challenges. The

analysis reveals that digital parasocial relationships differ qualitatively from their broadcast-era predecessors in several fundamental respects: they involve substantially greater apparent reciprocity through platform interaction affordances, exist within algorithmically curated information environments that naturalize parasocial encounters, are subject to systematic and sophisticated commercial exploitation through the multi-billion-dollar influencer marketing industry, extend to entirely non-human entities through the emergence of virtual influencers, and produce documented psychological effects that range from beneficial companionship to harmful compulsive engagement and parasocial breakup distress. These developments collectively demonstrate that existing theoretical frameworks, empirical research paradigms, and governance mechanisms are inadequate to the contemporary scale and complexity of parasocial phenomena.

Several important limitations of the present analysis should be acknowledged and addressed in future research. First, the empirical evidence base remains disproportionately drawn from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic populations, limiting the global generalizability of documented psychological mechanisms, well-being effects, and governance recommendations. Second, the rapid technological evolution of platform features, content formats, algorithmic systems, and emerging technologies including augmented reality, spatial computing, and artificial intelligence-powered interactive agents means that the specific parasocial dynamics analyzed here may be substantially transformed within a relatively short timeframe. Third, the present analysis has focused primarily on parasocial relationships formed through visual social media platforms, whereas the growing significance of audio-based parasocial relationships through podcasts, audiobooks, and voice-based social media platforms warrants separate theoretical development and empirical investigation.

Future research should prioritize several critical areas identified through this analysis. Longitudinal studies tracking the formation, development, maintenance, and dissolution of digital parasocial relationships over extended observation periods are urgently needed to understand the cumulative psychological effects of sustained parasocial engagement across developmental stages and life transitions. Cross-cultural comparative research examining parasocial dynamics across diverse cultural contexts, media ecosystems, and regulatory environments is essential for developing governance frameworks that are simultaneously globally applicable and culturally sensitive. Experimental research evaluating the effectiveness of different regulatory interventions, educational approaches, and platform design modifications

in moderating parasocial exploitation while preserving parasocial benefits would inform evidence-based governance development. Research on the parasocial dynamics of emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence-powered conversational agents capable of sustained, personalized, and apparently empathetic interaction, represents the most urgent frontier for parasocial interaction theory as these technologies promise to intensify the ethical challenges of commercially manufactured intimacy beyond anything the existing literature has documented.

Conclusion

Parasocial relationships in the age of digital influencers represent a qualitative transformation of the mediated intimacy phenomenon that Horton and Wohl identified seven decades ago in the relatively simple context of broadcast television. The combination of bidirectional communication affordances that create illusions of genuine reciprocity, algorithmic content curation that embeds parasocial encounters within interpersonal communication contexts, continuous multi-platform creator presence that produces unprecedented relational density and informational intimacy, performative authenticity norms that activate identity-based identification mechanisms, and systematic commercial exploitation through the multi-billion-dollar influencer marketing industry has created an ecosystem in which parasocial bonds are simultaneously more psychologically intense, more commercially valuable, and more ethically consequential than their broadcast-era predecessors.

The documented effects on audience well-being, including social comparison harms, body image disturbance, compulsive engagement patterns, anticipatory anxiety, and parasocial breakup distress, underscore the need for governance frameworks that address the structural conditions enabling parasocial exploitation rather than relying exclusively on individual audience resilience, media literacy education, or minimalist disclosure requirements. The governance challenge is genuinely multidimensional: it requires regulatory frameworks that protect vulnerable audiences, particularly children and adolescents, without restricting legitimate creative expression and beneficial parasocial engagement; ethical standards for influencer

practice that acknowledge the real relational responsibilities created by parasocial bonds; platform design obligations that support audience autonomy, commercial transparency, and psychological well-being; and sustained media literacy education that develops critical awareness of parasocial dynamics, commercial exploitation mechanisms, and algorithmic mediation of relational experience. Meeting this challenge will require sustained interdisciplinary collaboration among communication scholars, developmental and clinical psychologists, marketing ethicists, platform governance experts, policymakers, influencer communities, and the billions of audience members whose emotional investments and psychological well-being are at stake in the rapidly evolving parasocial ecosystem of digital media.

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