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## UNIT 3 PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND GAMING BEHAVIOUR\*

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### Learning Objectives

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- explain parasocial relationships,
- develop insights into the formation of parasocial relationships and their impact, and
- elucidate the effect of gaming and media fandom on human beings.

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## 3.0 INTRODUCTION

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We are increasingly realizing that we inhabit a world more virtual than real, at least for the last two years (through 2020 and 2021); the reason being the world wide pandemic-COVID-19 and resulting work-from-home arrangements. Teaching and learning, consulting medical professionals or therapists, organization of celebrations and parties, seminars and conferences, shopping, entertainment – everything is being organized in an online mode. Due to the norms of physical distancing, face-to-face conversations and meetings have reduced significantly. Even before the pandemic, the rise in information technology access and awareness led to what we may term ‘digital natives’ or citizens of the virtual world. The extent of this can easily be deciphered from the fact that on an average a person in India spends roughly 5 hours per day consuming media across platforms and browsing the internet (Statista, 2021). Thus, with the increased use of mass media, there is a possibility of developing an interaction between the users of media and human representations appearing in the media, like celebrities, presenters, actors, etc. Such typical social relationships are known as parasocial relationships which will be the focus of this Unit. Audience participation, fan clubs, interactive fan communities create a social environment and cultural experiences that comes out of the popular media. Fans become emotionally attached to their favourite media. This unique interaction between fans and media, known as media fandom will also be discussed in the Unit. Finally, the Unit will describe the phenomenon of celebrity worshipping which develops in countless people and in extreme cases, might become pathological.

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### 3.1 CONCEPT OF CELEBRITY AND PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

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*Before formally defining para-social relationships, let us answer some questions:*

- ✓ Are you a fan of some celebrity? Who are they? Do you consider them as ‘hero’ or your friend?
- ✓ Is there someone you consider an enemy or “bad person” yet cannot stop watching or do not want them to exit their show?
- ✓ Do you like Mumbai Indians or Chennai Super Kings or Bengal Royals?
- ✓ Who is your favourite television star? Do you ever wonder what these stars do in their non-screen life?
- ✓ Do you think about your favourite celebrity or feel close to them without even meeting them once in real life?

Is it correct to assume that while answering these questions you were thinking about some persons/groups and how you feel or think about them? And that in most of these relationships, your celebrity or television star does not know how they have a significant place in your life? Such a relationship

is called a parasocial relationship (PSR). A parasocial relationship is a relationship between 1) a media user and 2) their real or imaginary person(s) which is 3) mediated using a media platform (television, radio, games, YouTube and other such platforms). Interestingly, PSR can also be with fictional characters (like *Spiderman* or *Superman*) and other cartoon characters that do not exist in human form (like *Doraemon*, or *Noddy*).

Let us consider a few more statements-

*I love Molly. The more I start to think about and analyse the depth of her mothering for her own children and Harry, the more overwhelmed with emotion I become.*<sup>†</sup>

*I don't think Snape has ever said anything untrue, or anything that did not happen or was false, not about anyone. I don't have any doubt about it.*<sup>‡</sup>

If we pay attention to these quotes, taken from two of the *Harry Potter* fan sites or discussion forums, we can see how a character may emerge as a real entity from the pages of the books. These quotes are typical of several such posts posted on different fan sites about these two or other characteristics or this particular book/movie series and other such shows or books throughout the cyberspace. These figures (real or imaginary) have come to life for their fans and through the information available about these figures, fans believe that they know these figures and they are an important and intrinsic part of their lives, similar to people in their social circles. They seem to be emotionally involved in the series or how a particular character develops, to the extent that it may have consequences for the individual.

First described by **Horton** and **Wohl** in 1956, a parasocial relationship is “a kind of psychological relationship experienced by members of an audience in their mediated encounters with certain performers in the mass media, particularly on television” (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Since then, the definition of mass media has expanded far and wide to include much more advanced and interactive platforms (Facebook, YouTube, etc.)

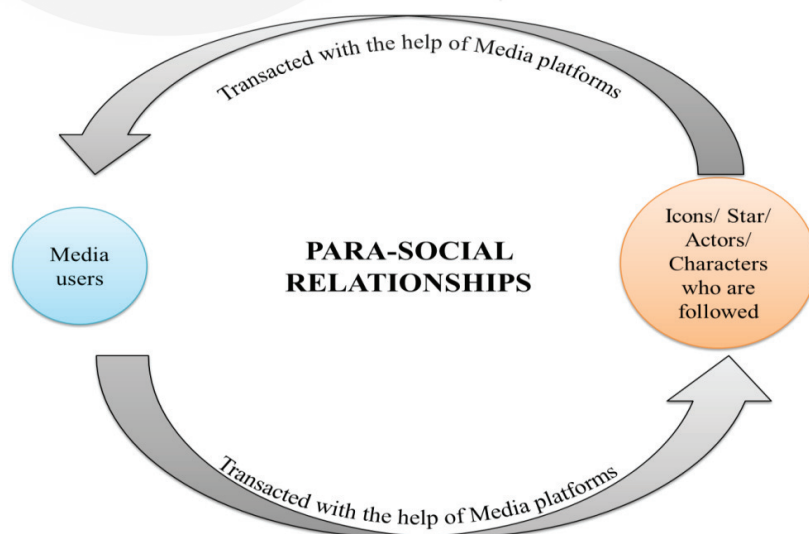


Figure3.1 What is a parasocial relationship?

<sup>†</sup><http://leakylounge.com> (Harry Potter discussion forum)

<sup>‡</sup><http://chamberofsecrets.com> (Harry Potter discussion forum)

As these relationships become more frequent and viewers spend more time with these media characters, a sense of intimacy develops (Derrick, Gabriel, & Tippin, 2008). With time, these characters also become quite predictable and the viewer is able to “understand”, or “know” their next move. This sense of intimacy combined with a holistic understanding of the character and its persona, the viewer believes that these characters are included in their group of friends by extension (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

All relationship theories are founded on the assumption of reciprocity. Even when the connection is established via internet, there is an underlying assumption of reciprocity. For instance, if you email somebody and do not get a reply ever, you cannot say that you and that person had a conversation or a relationship. A parasocial relationship is not like a social relationship and therefore, the term parasocial is used here. But, at times people assume that the relationship is imaginary in nature and the person is actually in an illusion that the media figure is involved in a relationship with them. Here a word of caution is must that it is unlike a psychiatric syndrome (erotomania) where the person involved believes themselves to be sexually involved with a famous person (Franzini & Grossberg, 1995). For any individual, living in a modern society, parasocial relationships are experienced with various media figures, who are real, fictional, and perhaps even non-human.

### 3.1.1 Defining Characteristics of PSRs

The following points are what make parasocial relationships alike other social relationship or social interactions.

- 1) **One-sidedness:** Parasocial relationships are usually one-sided, where the consumer of media seems to know about and feel for the media image (character, actor, cartoon, etc.) but the media person has no idea about this consumer.
- 2) **Investment:** As a consumer, the person invests time, energy and emotions in these relationships. This is seen not only through the inability to stop binge-watching series on Netflix or other such Over The Top (OTT) platforms, but also in incidents where fans’ emotional investment in these media figures has devastating consequences as mentioned below.

**TRIGGER**

**ADVISORY**

**WARNING** *Emotional Attachment in PSR: The case of Sushant Singh Rajput and His Fans*

Following the tragic death of actor Sushant Singh Rajput, some of his avid fans cited immense grief and an inability to deal with his death as a reason for tragically taking their own lives (Vaid, India.com, 2020).

- 3) **These relationships are voluntary:** PSR are voluntary relationships, much like other voluntary relationships in our real life. We can choose the media figure(s), we choose to invest in or not invest in. We can also choose to move away from a media figure we previously liked, but no longer do.
- 4) **Factors affecting interpersonal attraction apply to PSRs:** PSRs are also governed by factors similar to that of interpersonal attraction – we are more likely to develop a PSR with a person who is similar to us, shares common culture/ thoughts (Turner, 1993). The trends dominating the media make something “nearer” and easier to access for viewer. Age, gender and ethnicity also determine whether or not you would enter in a PSR with a media figure (discussed in detail in section 3.1.5)
- 5) **Provides companionship:** Parasocial relationships also provide the viewer with companionship, similar to the way social groups and friends do. Developing over a period of time, PSRs become more intense with time. The more the viewer can “*know*” the persona, the more they are able to “*predict*” their actions, giving an overall impression “*predictable*” person, something we can only do for people we are very close to. All of this proximity, intensity and predictability (though one-sided) mimics real-world friendships.
- 6) **Needs maintenance:** PSRs also need maintenance, much like relationships in real life. While in other social relationships one needs to stay in touch via messages, calls and personal meetings, in parasocial relationships one maintains the relationship through continued viewership, by following the media person across different social media websites and sometimes attending events where they get access to the celebrity in person (through concerts, meet and greets, etc.).

Gleich (1996) tried comparing the quality of relationships one has with media figures and the one has towards friends and/or neighbours. On dimensions such as confidence, proximity, idealism, strength of character, respondents’ best friends were evaluated higher than their favourite media figures, but ratings for a ‘*guter Nachbar*’ (good neighbour) and favourite media figure were much closer than those for friends. On dimensions such as sociability and passion, media figures were related highly than the good neighbours.

Rubin and Perse (1987) had an interesting take on parasocial interactions (PSIs). They discussed that these interactions may arise from an altruistic human instinct to form attachment with others, irrespective of the distance between them. Reeves and Nass (1996) tried putting forth the evolutionary perspective here and argued that this is an example of ‘media equation’ where a social response is elicited by cues that are related to some human characteristic, like a human face on screen. An important aspect to be considered here is that a fully comprehensive theory of PSI needs to distinguish between media figures who are direct representations of real



people (such as a news reader), a fictional creation (such as a character played by an actor), or a completely fantasy figure with ‘low modality’ (such as a cartoon character). Media consumers can possibly encounter some of these figures in the real world or physical realm, whereas certain others always remain imaginary. Until such a contact has been established, the nature of the relationship remains parasocial for the one who is using the media.

*How to separate a parasocial relationship from stalking behaviour, delusional behaviours and other forms of socially inappropriate and potentially harmful forms of media figures interactions?* It may seem that parasocial relationships are a kind of obsession which is harmful as the consumer may seem to be completely detached from reality believing that they are in a reciprocal relationship (give and take as in real life). But it is important to note here that the incidents where celebrities are stalked, harassed, or threatened, are actions resulting from other disorders (such as antisocial personality disorder and psychopathy) and not a result of a PSR. A PSR retains the “*as if*” characteristic, i.e., “I feel *as if* I know Alia Bhatt. The consumer can rationally distinguish a friendship from a PSR, even if they are equally emotionally invested.

### 3.1.2 The Changing Landscape of PSRs

Earlier the media figures with whom a PSR was formed included television and movie stars, even newsreaders and TV presenters. An excellent example of the intensity of PSR when television was relatively new in India, was the way people in India loved and worshipped Arun Govil and Deepika Chikhlia, the actors who played Lord Rama and Goddess Sita respectively in the popular Television series ‘*Ramayana*’ (Hindu epic poem) on Doordarshan in 1987-1988. “People would bathe and garland their TV sets before the serial began”, says Biswas (2011). The rituals people engaged in before watching the program “mirrored temple conventions and the series brought the temple experience of *darshan* – visual communion – into homes and public spaces where it was screened” (Verma, 2019). Such is the impact of parasocial relationships! Similarly, the extremely popular show ‘*Friends*’ aired by NBC from 1994 to 2004 continues to have huge impact on the younger audiences even now.

Over the years, the way media consumers interact with personas, has evolved. This is largely attributed to the advent of *internet* and *social media*, but advertisers and data giants also play a big role in this change. This means that while Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and other such platforms do encourage a larger population of people to form a greater number of PSRs, algorithms that suggest content and advertisement companies that curate content specific to each and every one of the millions of internet users have also played a big role in shaping the PSRs that are being formed today. Following are the few ways in which PSRs have changed over the course of time:

- 1) **Number of PSRs:** As the content market grows, with new models, creators, influencers each day, an individual has larger scope to form more PSRs. As the world moves towards a more individualised society (Santos, Varnum & Grossmann, 2017), the need of parasocial relationships also increases.

### Box 3.1 The case of Mukbang: Korean Eating Shows

In the early 2010s, a trend of Korean and other Asian influencers, eating online began. The idea was to share a meal together. The presenter would cook and eat food, while conversing with the viewers. As the number of households with single members skyrockets in Korea (Chea, 2021), this was one way for people to dine together, while not having to follow the traditional and strict food eating culture of Korea.

- 2) **Increasing intimacy of PSRs:** With the emergence of reality television and talk shows, viewers get as close a view into a media persona's life as possible. This has led to a gradual increase in the intensity of the relationship formed. This can be explained by the fact that as more about the persona is known (and stars who are "authentic and relatable" garner attention and support), the more "real" the PSR becomes.
- 3) **Increasing accessibility- Are PSRs no longer a one-way relationship?** Unlike when the term was coined, PSRs now have a possibility of becoming two-way relationships, at least partially. This happens when a celebrity responds to a fan or critics Tweet, or hosts a live vlog, or arranges a meet and greet, fans get to have a real interaction with the persona behind the screen.

### 3.1.3 Developmental Aspects of Parasocial Interactions

While discussing various aspects about parasocial relationships, it would be imperative to discuss how PSIs develop across lifespan. Media's role in the lives of children has been heavily researched upon and as we have already discussed that the media landscape is forever changing, the role it plays in children's lives is also changing. Research in the area of PSR has suggested that when consumers identify with media personas and form bonds with them, it is a form of relationship similar to an interpersonal relationship (Giles, 2002). Research has demonstrated that children bond with media characters much before they even start preschool and form an emotional and parasocial relationship with them (Hoffner, 2006). Such PSRs usually imply that children identify with these characters as a person, they have internalized norms of behaviour, and they also express a desire to have these characters as a friend in real life (Giles, 2002; Wilson & Drogos, 2007). We all know that children spend a lot of time and learn from their first relationships with their parents/caregivers but they also spend a great deal of time with different media outlets- watching cartoons such as *SpongeBob*, *Peppa Pig*, *Dora*, *Mickey Mouse*, *Chota Bheem*, etc. Thus, it is influential in development of

certain characteristics in a child (Hoffner, 2008). Many researchers have concluded that a considerable amount of time is spent in learning from television characters, forming potential relationships with these characters, and being influenced by the images they see (Hoffner, 2006; Wilson & Drogos, 2007). It also has an impact on the kind of friends they select, if they select same-sex friends or not. It may contribute to their understanding of social rules, language, social role and culture.

PSRs are common in adolescence; in fact, they demonstrate a greater attention to and preoccupation with media figures and relatives in comparison to other age groups (Maltby et al., 2005). They may have an important role to play in adolescent identity formation and autonomy development along with maintaining them as real interactions and relationships (Schiappa et al., 2007). These relationships are also a reflection of the social concerns of this particular developmental period. Madison and Porter (2015) reiterated that as adolescents begin to construct their autonomous selves and engage in identity formation, parasocial processes might present different identities for their consideration, they may take inspiration from these media figures and this may help the individuals in developing their own perspective. Thus, we can say that the media figure choice might actually be meaningful. For instance, an adolescent girl might engage in PSR with a popular, attractive actress, who affords an alternate and attractive affiliation to that provided by her own parents (Klimmt et al., 2006). Adults on the other hand, describe media figures as akin to their neighbours (Gleich, 1996, as cited in Giles, 2002). Adolescent relationship with celebrities, in addition to or instead of friendship, might also seem supportive and hierarchical, such as those with their mentors or coaches.

### **3.1.4 Understanding PSRs through Piagetian theory of Cognitive Development**

Piaget's theory of cognitive development is well documented and clearly states in four different stages how cognitive development may happen from infancy to adolescence. The theory demonstrates that as a child moves through development, each stage operates with a set of limitations on the ability of the child to perceive, understand and make sense of the information from the environment. Therefore, for the same stimulus, the comprehension might be different, as it depends upon the child's age.

Four stages outlined by Piaget are from birth through the age of 15 (by then the child is said to develop adult information processing ability). The first or the initial stage is sensorimotor (birth to 24 months). This is the stage with innate, reflexive capabilities of the child but primitive symbolic representation gradually begins. By the end of this stage, the child has a clear understanding of when the television is on and off, and if that means they can or cannot watch their favourite shows. This could be understood as the beginning of establishing a routine of television watching and eventually getting attracted to certain characters, songs or programmes. A child in this



stage (at least by the end of it) can recognize symbols and logos well enough to make sense if they are on the “correct” channel or video or not (Palmer & Mac Neil, 1991).

With this basic understanding, the child enters the next stage- preoperational stage (2 to 7 years). By this time, symbolic performance begins with object stability and the individual may continue with symbolic play and language development. At this stage, the relationship with media characters is transformed in the child’s mind. The child forms attachment to favourite characters, pretends to be like them, dresses up, and engages in imaginary play even with their favourite character (Hoffner, 2008). As mentioned above, this is also vital to school relationships and play behaviour. One of the major limitations of this stage is the difficulty in differentiating between reality and fantasy which is also reflected in the fact that they may lose sight of the fact that the characters that are on screen are not in real life (Richert & Smith, 2011).

Preschool children are perceptually bound, that is they pay extra attention to how a stimulus looks and sounds, even at the cost of excluding some other relevant information or bypass certain conceptual properties and functions (Wilson 2008). Their path and understanding of decision making are extremely simple and that may influence their choices, likes, and dislikes. Children at this stage are more likely to attend to a character’s physical appearance and actions and may even learn from those, rather than paying too much attention to their plot line. It has already been documented that preoperational children are more likely to admire an attractive character irrespective of the fact if they are heroes or villains (Wilson, 2008). Children as young as 2–3-year-old often ascribe life to inanimate objects, have imaginary friends, but by the age of 4 or 5, they start questioning the reality of television and programmes. For instance, cartoons are often understood as fantasy, especially because the characters are animated. Chernin (2008) discussed that if the children are not clear whether a character is real or fictional, they tend to be easily persuaded by the messages and internalize them.

The next one is concrete operational stage (7-11 years) and comes with a set of new abilities which include being able to see a situation from another person’s perspective, which gives scope for additional identification and empathy for the media character (Palmer & MacNeil, 1991).

The final stage is the formal operational stage (11-15 years) wherein the child is capable of thinking about abstract concepts, like deductive reasoning, and systematic planning. It is akin to reaching maturity in cognitive ability. Understanding these stages of cognitive development is important in comprehending how media affects children differently at all ages, especially considering their age-specific strengths and limitations.

### 3.1.5 Factors affecting PSRs

The main factors affecting parasocial relationship are as follows:

- 1) **Similarity and ability to empathise with the character:** Research suggests that media users evaluate media figures along similar criteria to people they encounter in real life (Rubin et al., 1985). If individuals find a media character similar to them or aspire to be like them then there are higher chances that they will identify with that particular character much more. It also seems likely that once we have made a judgment about a media figure or attribute person characteristics to them, then we respond to that figure “as if” it occupies our physical space, eventually incorporating it in our social realm. Thus, we attribute similar psychological processes to both parasocial relationships and face-to-face relationships. Turner (1993) tried understanding parasocial interaction from the perspective of homophily and found similarity to be an important factor in the strength of the parasocial relationship.
- 2) **Gender and age of the consumer:** Gender of the individual also plays a role in identifying with a media character and also emulating it. Let’s take children as an example in this case. It has been found that children are most likely to select same-sex friends. If we look at the current media landscape, there are limited female characters for children to relate to and bond with. Perhaps *Dora the Explorer* is the only most notable example of a female protagonist (in cartoon characters) in comparison to a variety of male characters such as *SpongeBob*, *Mickey Mouse*, *Chota Bheem* etc. Due to this situation, girls are left to either choose a male character or choose from a very limited selection of female characters. Hoffner (2006) concluded that girls are much more likely to select favourite male characters than boys are to select female characters. Children’s media relationships may also impact them socially in terms of their inclination to play with opposite sex friends. Gleason, Theran, and Newberg (2017) concluded that most adolescents (61.1%) consider their favourite media figures as relationship partners. They found that boys choose more athletes than girls and imagined celebrities as authority figures or mentors than their friends. Girls seemed to focus more on actresses.
- 3) **Prevalent trends:** Sometimes, it is the fad or the trend that decides which media character becomes popular and is followed by people. For instance, *Dhinchak Pooja* emerged as a trend and received enormous media attention after her music videos were released. They received millions of views on YouTube shortly after their individual releases. Another popular figure *Khabane Lame*, popularly known as ‘Khaby Lame’ is a social media influencer, who is famous for posting videos. It began when one of his videos went viral on TikTok and thereafter became a star on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter as well. Another popular trend that has emerged quite recently is “Stand-Up Comedy” and

many comedians such as Zakir Khan, Biswa Kalyan Rath, Kannan Gill, Sumukhi Suresh became popular, especially with teenagers and young adults.

### Check Your Progress 1

1) Define parasocial relationships.

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2) Define various characteristics of PSRs.

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3) What makes PSRs like other social relationships?

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4) Explain the evolutionary perspective in understanding PSRs.

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## 3.2 EFFECTS OF PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) can range from healthy social relationships to negative and potentially harmful social interaction. Let us see the effects of PSRs.

### 3.2.1 Positive Impact of PSRs

1) **Shaping identity.** Consistent with Bandura's social cognitive theory, research evidence demonstrates that children learn from all kinds of televised role-positive and negative. It has a role to play in acquiring norms and standards for conduct through various media platforms. For instance, they may learn sex stereotyping through it, as gender of children's favourite TV character has been found to be strongly correlated with gender of the children (Hoffner, 1996). As discussed these interactions become all the more important for adolescents, especially in the context of identity formation.

- 2) **Can act as social glue.** In an urbanized and alienated society, these imaginary characters become social frame of reference. A society has a cast of characters that its members are expected to know about- spirits, leaders, media figures etc. Such factors act as social glue and provide common cultural ground among strangers also. We spend a lot of time conversing about people we have never met, yet we feel that we know them. We spend more time privately, consuming media-watching television, reading newspapers, magazines, surfing internet etc. and all these activities immerse us in a virtual social network where we come to know about a variety of things, sometimes to a degree of intimacy that is not even possible with a romantic partner (Giles, 2010).
- 3) **Rejection-free relationship.** PSRs also provide idealized figures with whom the adolescents can imagine total acceptance. The potential lack of actual contact with these idealized figures offers positive social interaction without risk of rejection or feelings of worthlessness. One can never know everything about a media character or icon, this allows adolescents and young adults to attach various attributes (could be fantasy) onto these figures which may help them in meeting their own specific wants or needs.
- 4) **Learning through media.** Learning from parasocial relationships is directly correlated with the strength of the relationship. Lauricella and Colleagues (2011) conducted a study in which they tried teaching seriation sequencing by one of the two characters-Elmo and DoDo. Elmo is an iconic character in the American culture and thus is socially meaningful. DoDo is a popular character in Taiwan and less well known in America. They found that children were able to learn from the socially meaningful character better than the one they less easily recognized. However, when they were given DoDo toys to play with, their ability to learn from this character increased.
- 5) **Parasocial Contact Hypothesis – building bridges with the help of media.** Parasocial relationship or parasocial contact may play an important role in adjusting discriminatory behaviors, such as racial attitudes. Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes (2005) suggested that people could potentially decrease their dependence on stereotypes and levels of prejudice towards a group if they are exposed to media in which these groups are featured. This has been termed as Parasocial Contact Hypothesis. The research in this area has been mostly focussed on sexual orientation and ethnic minority.

### 3.2.2 Negative Impact of PSRs

- 1) **Parasocial breakups.** It has been defined as “a situation where a character with whom a viewer has developed a PSR goes off the air” (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). It has been seen that the emotional distress that consumers experienced after a parasocial break up is more or less similar

to the one that is felt after a social relationship gets dissolved but is weaker than that of a real-life interpersonal relationship (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011).

- 2) **Impact on body image.** PSRs can also be evaluated with regard to body image and self-perception. A study with adolescents revealed that media exposure may have a direct negative impact on body image. It revealed that parasocial relationships with favourite characters, motivation to compare self, and engagement in social comparison with these media characters amplified the negative effects on body images of adolescents. Young, Gabriel, and Hollar (2013) concluded that men who did not form a parasocial relationship with a muscular superhero had a poor self-perception and felt negative about their bodies, especially after being exposed to muscular characters.
- 3) **Provocation of aggression.** PSIs could also act as a link between aggression and identification with aggressive characters. It has been found that people who tend to be more aggressive usually develop PSRs with characters that are aggressive or display aggressive tendencies (Eyal & Rubin, 2003).

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Explain the role of PSRs in shaping identity of an individual.

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- 2) What is the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis?

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- 3) What are parasocial break-ups?

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### 3.3 RELATIONSHIP TO VIDEO GAME STREAMERS AND UNDERSTANDING MEDIA FANDOM

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With the growing trend of social media and OTT platforms, researchers have started examining microcelebrities- individual who have amassed a large collection of followers in an online context (Senft, 2008). In this section we will discuss the aspects related to gaming and media fandom.

#### 3.3.1 Gaming and its Consequences

The “self”, as a concept has grown increasingly important in interactive media environments. A study by Jin and Park (2009) investigated self-related processes in an avatar-based game console, *Wii*, which has a motion-sensing capability that allows players to manipulate and interact with items on screen via movement. Here, parasocial interaction was defined as the extent of game players’ interpersonal involvement with their avatar (in the game) and the degree to which they perceive themselves as interacting with the avatar. It was concluded that game players who had a high interdependent self-construal demonstrated closer parasocial interaction than the ones who had low interdependent self-construal.

#### 3.3.2 Media Fandom

Over the years, media fandom has rapidly evolved as a result of alternative ways to consume media (Twitter, Twitch etc.). Due to emergence of social TV, consumption of parallel media (for instance, watching TV while using twitter to comment on the program one is watching simultaneously) is impacted by interactions consistent with live events on screen (Buschow, Schneider, & Ueberheide, 2014). Fandom is possible without online communities but with new age media, like-minded fans have united across the world. Members of communities may gather for annual events, conventions etc. (e.g. Comic-Con). These online communities allow the fans to unite, bringing a whole new meaning to the term “community”. A huge sense of identification as a self-proclaimed and knowledgeable fan is an integral part of belonging within a community. Factors and considerations such as belonging, friendship, support, and conscious identification impact the overall communal element of being a fan. These online platforms allow fans to interact with other members of large audiences ranging from fans to other onlookers and even potentially rival fans (Wood & Baughman, 2012).

If we talk about gaming communities, it would be important to note here that the interdependent relationships are created to overcome challenges together (Teng, 2013). Watching a streamer overcome a challenge while the community encourages him/her leads to a sort of satisfaction in the individual and also develops affinity. Over time, stream viewers may develop parasocial relationships with the streamer as they experience the achievements of the game together.

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### 3.4 EXTREME PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND CELEBRITY WORSHIPPING

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Parasocial phenomenon is a very common response of users to media characters but in very rare cases they may take extreme forms and are considered detrimental to the long-term social adaptation of a user. Extreme and delusory forms of parasocial relationship may hamper the personal well-being of an individual. According to Horton & Wohl (1956), “it is only when the parasocial relationship becomes a substitute for autonomous social participation, (or) when it proceeds in absolute defiance of objective reality that it can be regarded as pathological” (p. 223).

If maintenance of parasocial relationships result in exclusion, rather than inclusion of an individual from an existing social group, it turns dysfunctional. In such cases, the potential short term positive effect (such as support they obtain from the media character) is outweighed by the more detrimental long-term negative effects which may result from the alienation among really-existing peers. PSRs also turn dysfunctional if they become delusional, that is, if individuals become ignorant towards their one-sided character and desire or expect reciprocity. In the long run, they may hamper an individual’s healthy adjustment to and inclusion in relevant real-world social settings.

Extreme forms of celebrity worshipping can also be detrimental to healthy social adaptation of an individual (McCutcheon, Lange, & Houran, 2002). Fervent and devoted fans of a celebrity may show behaviour similar to the celebrity or the characters played by them and engage in similar activities. It has been believed that low levels of celebrity worshipping is common and also functional in nature as it focuses on celebrity’s ability to entertain and knowing or sharing information about the celebrity (Stever, 2011) but moderate forms can be considered as problematic, as they seem to appeal mainly to individuals with a compromised identity structure. They may include intense feelings of mental preoccupation with a celebrity (“My favourite celebrity is my soulmate.” “We are destined to meet.”). Intense forms are considered as borderline pathological as they are characterized by exaggerated devotion (“If I get lakhs of rupees, I will consider them spending on a personal possession (like a napkin etc.) once used by my favourite celebrity”. They may also have compulsive and delusional qualities (erotomania, stalking etc.) and thus may negatively affect the well-being of an individual.

#### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Discuss an individual’s relation to gaming and video game streamers.

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2) How does fandom and online communities impact an individual?

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3) What is the extreme form of parasocial relationship?

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### 3.5 SUMMARY

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Let us review what we have learnt in this Unit.

- Parasocial relationship (PSR) is a one-sided connection imagined with media figures and celebrities. As the sense of intimacy and connection increases with these characters and personas, viewer starts believing these characters to be a part of their group of friends by extension.
- Some of the important characteristics of PSR include the fact that these relationships are one-sided and voluntary in nature, they demand investment of time, energy and emotions from the consumers. Different factors that apply to interpersonal attraction also apply here and much like real life relationships they need maintenance.
- PSRs are different from stalking behaviour, delusional behaviour and other forms of socially inappropriate and potentially harmful forms of behaviour.
- Due to advent of internet, various forms of social media, advertisers, and data giants, the landscape of PSRs has changed drastically. The change is so huge that now PSRs have a possibility of becoming two-way relationships, at least to some extent.
- Children bond with media characters and figures much before they even start with pre-school and these characters may play a role in internalizing norms and behaviour. Similarly, PSRs play an important role in adolescent development as well, especially in identity formation.
- Factors such as similarity and empathy with the media character, gender and age of the consumer, and trends prevalent at that time in the society affect parasocial relationship and its quality.
- PSRs have both positive and negative consequences. Some of its positive effects could be its role in shaping identity, acting as a social glue, learning opportunity that media provides, chance of a rejection free relationship and also in adjusting with discriminatory behaviour. Some

negative consequences may involve provocation of aggression, body image issues and a situation of parasocial breakups.

- Certain forms of parasocial relationship may negatively impact the personal health and well-being of the individual concerned. It may include forms such as intense celebrity worshipping which may also have a compulsive and delusional quality to it.

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### 3.6 KEYWORDS

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**Body Image** An individual's thoughts, feelings and perceptions about aesthetic, sexual or overall appeal of their body's attractiveness. This is highly governed by media exposure and para-social relationships, the celebrity we identify with.

**Celebrity Worshipping** When a person becomes overly involved with details of a celebrity (public figure), their personal and professional life.

**Cognitive Development** It focuses on child development, in terms of information processing, perceptual skill, language development and other aspects of the development of adult brain. It involves how we perceive, think and gain sense of the world around us.

**Parasocial Relationships** One-sided relationships where one person invests interest, time and emotional energy and the other party is completely unaware of their existence. For instance, our relationship with celebrities, athletes, etc.

**Parasocial Contact Hypothesis** Parasocial contact can provide the experience that may help in reducing prejudice and discrimination, especially when the majority group has limited opportunities to interact with the minority group, media exposure can be of great help.

**Parasocial Break-ups** A situation where a media character or celebrity suddenly goes off air or withdraws all contact.

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### 3.7 REVIEW QUESTIONS

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- 1) Discuss some of the ways in which parasocial relationships have changed over the years.
- 2) How do parasocial interactions develop across lifespan?
- 3) Explain PSRs in the context of Piagetian theory of cognitive development.
- 4) Elucidate some of the factors affecting PSRs.
- 5) Elaborate upon the positive and negative impacts of PSRs.
- 6) How is celebrity worshipping maladaptive?

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### 3.8 ADDITIONAL ONLINE RESOURCES

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- <https://www.findapsychologist.org/para-social-relationships-the-nature-of-celebrity-fascinations/>
- [https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20210615-why-tvs-most-toxic-stereotype-endures\\_50993\\_ch\\_8.pdf](https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20210615-why-tvs-most-toxic-stereotype-endures_50993_ch_8.pdf) (sagepub.com)

