Parasocial Relationships and Fanfiction: Intimacy, Identification, Friendship, and New Media

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Abstract

The concept of parasocial relationships has been around for a number of years. There are many varying factors that cause individuals to turn to media and develop a parasocial relationship through that media over time. Parasocial relationships can be expanded and facilitated through the reading and writing of fanfiction, which are fictional stories written by fans of characters or media personalities. The expansions of parasocial relationships, or fanfiction, can be found through many websites on the internet, including fanfiction.net, Wattpad, and Tumblr. The following paper will examine the causes of parasocial relationships and how those connect to the reading and writing of fanfiction.
Parasocial relationships are defined as: “a sense of friendship or emotional attachment that develops between TV viewers and media personalities” (Griffin et al., 2018, p. 352). Parasocial relationships are traditionally associated with television viewers who seek interpersonal connectedness with fictional characters (Griffin et al., 2018). However, in recent years, parasocial studies have turned to alternate forms of media for analysis. Books, television shows, movies, and other online entertainment portray diverse and complex characters that consumers identify with. Media consumers often form what they feel to be interpersonal relationships with these characters, while knowing that these relationships are completely fictional (parasocial). There are many aspects of an individual’s life that can lead to parasocial relationships. These aspects may relate to mental health, sexual orientation, relationship status, limited social interaction, and more. This project hopes to answer the following research question:

RQ1: How do parasocial relationships in fanfiction serve as substitutes for interpersonal qualities of intimacy, identification, and friendship?

This project will expand on traditional studies of parasocial relationships by exploring how these relationships manifest in new media. While traditional parasocial relationships can be developed with characters from a television show, a movie, or a book, modern technologies have created new outlets for these fictional relationships. They can now be easily created through many different applications that are used on smartphones, like YouTube or Tik Tok. These two forms of media are relatively new, but due to their popularity, parasocial relationships can be observed widely across both platforms. In addition to easier access, parasocial relationships are also more prevalent when people experience periods of limited social interaction, like during the
periods of mandated quarantine caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. People experiencing more free time will likely use more media resulting in more parasocial relationships (Woznicki, et al., 2021).

Parasocial relationships often lead to an emotional attachment, which can affect a person in the same ways that a real relationship would (Greenwood & Long, 2011, p. 280). The viewer can often become so attached to the media personality or character that their fictional relationship impacts their ability to interact with people around them. Parasocial relationships can lead to friendships or romantic relationships that impact individuals the way a relationship would in real life. There are also times that parasocial relationships are developed to prevent the feeling of loneliness. These relationships can be created because the viewer or reader desires to have a life like the character or media personality. In short, there are many reasons as to why parasocial relationships are developed. Fanfictions present a fascinating twist to parasocial relationships, in that once the relationship has developed, there are people who escalate the relationship by creating a fanfiction (alternative online storyboard) based off of the original relationship/storyboard. In the following section the development of parasocial relationships and the creation of fanfictions are discussed in order to apply the theory of parasocial relationships to specific fanfiction storylines.

Methodology

This project engages in a qualitative rhetorical analysis of three popular fanfiction sites. Popularity is measured by the number of subscribers and viewers a site maintains. Most fanfiction sites function in traditional publishing terms, meaning that authors publish chapters that fantasize alternative story lines to previously created books, movies, video games, Youtubers, or other famous, online personalities. In these storylines, authors and community
members engage in online forum discussions that often reveal the motivations behind the parasocial relationship. These motivations typically reveal a desire to substitute lived experiences of friendship, intimacy, and identification with the object of a parasocial relationship.

The three popular fanfiction sites that will be included for analysis are FanFiction.net, Wattpad, and Tumblr. All of these sites are frequently used to publish and read fanfiction stories. In addition, each of the sites give the users the ability to interact with each other and discuss the fanfiction that has been published. Users often discuss in detail their motives behind creating the fanfictions, the feelings they have associated with their parasocial relationships, and other topics that are related. Examples of fanfictions from these sites will be discussed within the analysis, along with samples pulled from discussion boards, comments, and other posts.

Literature Review

Parasocial relationships are a concept found in the Uses and Gratifications Theory which was created by Elihu Katz (Griffin et al., 2018, p. 346). Katz began the development of Uses and Gratifications in the 1950s when media and technology were developing at previously unprecedented levels, but still limited when compared to mediated technology developed in recent years. Alan Rubin was a communication scholar that worked to expand the Uses and Gratifications Theory. In 1981, he created a typology list to classify the different reasons as to why people consume media. There are eight motivations within the typology list: passing time, companionship, escape, enjoyment, social interaction, relaxation, information, and excitement. Rubin then found that people often consume media to feel a sense of friendship, romantic relationship, or any emotional connection, which led to his discovery of parasocial relationships (Griffin et al., 2018, p. 350). Research has led to the conclusion that parasocial relationships “play a central role in media gratifications and effects” (Tukachinsky, 2011, p. 77). This specific
type of relationship has become one of the main reasons as to why people use the many different forms of media that are available.

Parasocial relationships can also be studied through Social Exchange Theory. People seeking to learn more about one another engage in “the process of developing deeper intimacy with another person through mutual self-disclosure and other forms of vulnerability” (Griffin et al., 2018, p. 94). Social Exchange Theory suggests that relationships are “regulated by both parties’ evaluations of perceived rewards and costs of interaction with each other” (Griffin et al., 2018, p. 97). Parasocial relationships can be connected to social exchange theory because they function as traditional relationships, except they lack reciprocated feelings and actions (Adam & Sizemore, 2013; Tukachinsky, 2011). Furthermore, they can be connected because benefits and costs can come from parasocial relationships in a similar way that benefits and costs would come from a real-life relationship (Adam & Sizemore, 2013). It has been discovered that individuals do gain benefits from parasocial relationships like they would in a traditional relationship (Adam & Sizemore, 2013, p. 21).

Personal interests and desires impact the probability of a parasocial relationship. If the viewer or reader is not fascinated by what they are watching or reading, then the probability of the parasocial relationship developing is less likely. Similarly, the specific form of media that is being consumed has an effect on what type of parasocial relationship will develop. Tukachinsky, states “based on previous research, different genres, media content and media personae may be likely to prompt different types of parasocial relationships” (Tukachinsky, 2011, p. 90). Different appeals of a person and different forms of media can lead to different types of parasocial relationships. This correlates to specific interests because if a person is less interested by a written text, then they are less likely to develop parasocial relationships with a character within
textual entertainment. Additionally, if a person lacks interest in a specific genre, like horror, then the relationship is unlikely to occur. However, if they have a strong interest in the form of media and the genre, a parasocial relationship is probable.

Characteristics and traits have a major impact on a parasocial relationship developing. When viewing media or interacting with people online, it is likely for a person to feel more connected with people they perceive as similar to them (Liebers & Schramm, 2017, p. 15). The idea of perceived similarity is defined as “the recognition of shared characteristics judged as meaningful by relational partners” (Bond, 2018, p. 460). For example, members of the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, plus) community tend to develop more parasocial relationships because they lack support in their real-life. If their family is disapproving or their friends are not understanding, different forms of media can be a helpful outlet for finding acceptance. The viewer or reader will begin to feel connected to characters or media personalities because they would approve of who they are or are a member of the LGBTQ+ community themselves (Bond, 2018). Cohen (2014) provides another example of the importance of similarity in a study on children and media. In this case, it was demonstrated that children look at the similarities between themselves and mediated characters quite often. A child that has more aggressive tendencies may be more interested or feel more connected to a character that has the same tendencies (Cohen, p. 147). This is comparable to how in-person and real-life relationships are formed because similarities between people are usually what initiate a relationship.

A person facing issues regarding their mental health may be more likely to develop a parasocial relationship as well. A study that analyzes parasocial relationships and specific aspects of mental health concluded that “older adults in low-quality relationships with romantic
partners and children might turn to parasocial relationships as an alternative way of improving their mental well-being” (Bernhold & Metzger, 2020, p. 170). If the mental well-being of an individual is not benefited by the people in their life, they may gravitate towards fictional and mediated relationships. Comparably, “the more socially anxious individuals are, the more they depend on alternatives, such as parasocial relationships, to satisfy their need to belong” (Bérail et al., 2019, p.192). Parasocial relationships can alleviate some of the negative symptoms that are associated with mental health disorders and conditions (Bernhold & Metzger, 2020). This signifies the importance of parasocial relationships in the lives of people who suffer from issues associated with mental health and well-being.

Anxiety disorders have a significant impact on parasocial relationships and the use of media, as well. This is because anxiety leads to the development of parasocial relationships, as well as a possible addiction to various online forms of media (Bérail et al., 2019). This can be explained by the idea that “parasocial relationships are more pronounced among individuals who desire intimate real relationships but are anxious about their realization” (Harmann, 2016, p. 138). People often have the desire to form relationships, but their anxiety is too intense for them to pursue real life relationships. Bérail, Guillon, and Bungener (2019) explain that “the moderated-mediation model of YouTube addiction suggests that the more socially anxious individuals are, the more their parasocial relationships with YouTubers may lead to YouTube addiction” (p. 199). If people suffer from an anxiety disorder, not only will they develop parasocial relationships, but they may become addicted to the relationships and the platforms that host the relationships.

In addition to social anxiety, attachment anxiety can also frequently lead people to developing parasocial relationships (Bernhold & Metzger, 2020, p. 169). People who suffer from
attachment anxiety often “characteristically seek frequent contact with their relational partners, experience greater relational uncertainty, and exhibit more extreme highs and lows in their relationships” (Bond, 2021). Attachment anxiety can be subsided through parasocial relationships because the character or media personality can fulfill needs that a real-life relationship cannot. Greenwood and Long (2011) found that:

individuals who experience anxiety about and within the context of their close relationships (those with attachment anxiety) as well as the extent to which they are included in social life (those with a high need to belong) who were also not involved in a current romantic relationship showed the greatest imagined intimacy with opposite gender media figures (p. 292).

This evidence indicates that people who suffer from attachment anxiety are more likely to develop a fictional or parasocial relationship. Bernhold and Metzger (2020) also note that attachment anxiety can worsen the impacts that depression has on a person, meaning people will form parasocial relationships to evade depressive symptoms (p. 174).

Research reveals that people who experience depression have a higher chance of developing parasocial relationships. Exploring this topic led to the idea that “formation of parasocial relationships predicted lower levels of depressive symptoms for two types of participants: (1) older adults with high attachment anxiety and high-quality real-life relationships and (2) older adults with low attachment anxiety and low-quality real-life relationships” (Bernhold & Metzger, 2020 p. 175). These fictional relationships are utilized by young people as well as older people to help them battle depression. Parasocial relationships allow people to eliminate negative feelings associated with depression or those that result from undesirable relationship factors.
People often experience difficulties when interacting with others in person or people may have to experience periods of time where their real-life social interaction is very limited. The people who are challenged by these factors may become lonely from the lack of social interaction, so they often turn to different forms of media to combat that loneliness (Griffin, et. al, 2018). Avoiding loneliness is acknowledged as one of the main reasons for developing parasocial relationships. Bond (2018) explains “that PSRs [parasocial relationships] may supplant real-life social relationships for individuals who do not have strong social skills or real-life social networks” (p. 460). Loneliness and lack of social skills are associated with both romantic parasocial relationships and parasocial friendships (Bond, 2018, p. 460; Adam & Sizemore, 2013). A study relating to these relationships and young adults found that “high parasocial relationship strength was associated with better outcomes for individuals in low family support and high loneliness contexts” (Woznicki et al., 2021, p. 234). Parasocial relationships positively affect the lives of people who experience loneliness or do not receive adequate emotional support from the people around them.

The COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing limited the ability for social interaction, which likely led to feelings of loneliness for people in quarantine (Bond, 2021). Research indicates that during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, fictional relationships became more common during the period of limited social interaction caused by quarantine and social distancing (Bond, 2021). Humans rely on some form of social or parasocial interaction to maintain stability and consistency in their lives (Bond, 2021). Social interaction, whether in-person or online, can help to eliminate loneliness, buffer negative emotions, satisfy social needs, and create many other solutions for an individual’s challenges (Bond, 2021). Bond’s study indicates that “participants who reported more mediated social engagement reported stronger
parasocial relationship growth” (Bond, 2021). The lack of social interaction led to an excess of mediated social engagement, causing an increase in the number and intensity of parasocial relationships.

If a person feels that they are unable to fit in or do not belong with others around them, then they will gravitate towards parasocial relationships (Greenwood & Long, 2011, p. 282). Greenwood and Long (2011) suggest that “Familiar media figures (typically of our own species) that we can see or hear through the mediation of a screen, page, or audio speaker, may also be utilized to fulfill symbolic belongingness needs” (p. 282). Fitting in or belonging is a standard motive that humans have for social interactions. When an individual feels a sense of belonging, many of the challenges they are facing will be addressed, such as issues with mental and emotional well-being, loneliness, attachment styles, and other similar aspects (Greenwood & Long, 2011, p. 282). The desire to relate and connect to the people a person is surrounded by are major contributors to the development of parasocial relationships.

There are times where people do not feel comfortable enough to develop in-person relationships because they do not feel prepared for the mental, emotional, and physical aspects that come with them (Tukachinsky, 2011, p. 90-91). The formation of a parasocial relationship can allow a person to prepare themselves for in-person interactions. Tukachinsky’s (2011) article notes “PSF [parasocial friendship] may be a source of self-exploration and self-enhancement through a sense of companionship and belongingness” (p. 90). The information that is gathered from a parasocial relationship that someone has with a celebrity or character can be used to understand themselves and to understand how real-life relationships operate. Parasocial relationships could lead to more successful in-person relationships because people may feel more equipped for the many aspects of a relationship.
Parasocial relationships were traditionally studied as relationships of friendship or companionship. However, the idea of a romantic parasocial relationship has become much more prevalent from the newer forms of media that have gained popularity (Bond, 2018). This is because the newer forms of media allow for more watching, rather than reading. When watching media or a form of entertainment, viewers are likely to find the media personality or character on the screen physically attractive. Based on previous research, attraction was discovered as one of the strongest predictors of parasocial relationship strength (Bond, 2018, p. 459). This means that the level of attraction a viewer experiences is often associated with determining if the parasocial relationship will be romantic or friendly. Parasocial relationships are more common due to the new forms of media, due to this younger generations tend to develop more parasocial relationships that exemplify romantic aspects. Older generations of media consumers tend to have the opposite type of parasocial relationships. Older generations will develop more parasocial friendships (Tukachinsky, 2011, p. 78).

It is much more likely for a single person to develop a parasocial relationship than someone who has a romantic partner, which can relate to the idea of loneliness that was previously mentioned. Greenwood and Long (2011), found that people who were not in a romantic relationship felt more inclined to imagine intimacy with characters or media personalities (p. 292). Additionally, different forms of anxiety have an impact on the development of parasocial relationships, and romantic parasocial relationships in particular. Research has revealed that anxiety caused by relationships and attachment styles have an impact on the development of parasocial relationships (Greenwood & Long, 2011; Cohen, 2014, p. 146). People who experience relationship anxiety are the most likely to develop parasocial relationships (Greenwood & Long, 2011, p. 292). “PSL [parasocial love] could provide the
audience with safe romantic experiences that prepare them for future romantic involvement” (Tukachinsky, 2011, p. 90). Romantic parasocial relationships can often benefit people who are single. Tukachinsky’s (2011) article notes that “past studies have shown that adolescents can ‘fall in love’ with media figures as part of their transition into sexuality and as a means of defining their sexual identity” (p. 77). The development of a romantic parasocial relationship allows people to gain a better understanding of their sexuality and prepare themselves for future romantic relationships.

New forms of media have a major impact on the development of parasocial relationships. Cohen (2014) discusses that “social media has fundamentally changed the nature of mediated relationships” (p. 148). He mentions that celebrities and fans having the ability to interact through social media platforms substantially influences parasocial relationships. In addition to new methods of interaction through social media, platforms like YouTube and Tik Tok seem to encourage parasocial relationships. Both YouTube and Tik Tok have significantly increased in popularity since their creation. An article discussing these new forms of media noted that “because the online world is impersonal and vast, adolescents may have the perception that they can experiment more freely without the fear of rejection, face- to-face encounters, humiliation or judgment by others” (Bossen & Kottasz, 2020, p. 467). A recent study concluded that YouTube is a central form of media that leads to parasocial relationships (Rihl & Wegener, 2019). The study notes that “the data show that parasocial relationships are measurable also in new, digitized media environments, demonstrating followers’ relatively strong parasocial relationships to YouTube celebrities” (Rihl & Wegener, 2019, p. 563). This supports the idea that new forms of media have a large impact on parasocial relationships and even lead to the relationships being more intense.
Another study that was conducted relating to YouTube, anxiety, and parasocial relationships discusses how YouTube increases the likelihood of parasocial relationships. The study notes that the structural design of YouTube fosters the development of parasocial relationships between the creators and viewers (Bérail et al., 2019, p. 199). It states “YouTube seems to have different functionalities that specifically promote asymmetrical relationships between viewers and YouTube” (Bérail et al., 2019, p. 199). This means that there are aspects of how this social media platform is set up that makes the potential for parasocial relationships much higher. The word functionalities within the text is referring to creators and viewers having the ability to communicate with each other through YouTube and many other social media sites. This study also presented the idea that YouTube is a platform for “parasocial networking” rather than traditional social networking that people often do. Parasocial relationships were previously recognized as a mechanism that people utilize to feel that they fit in or belong. Bérail, Guillon, and Bungener (2019) claim that “‘parasocial networking’ seems to satisfy the need to belong of individuals” (p. 199). These fictional relationships and methods of networking are fulfilling the needs of people due to the many features that YouTube offers.

Tik Tok is a newer form of social media that has rapidly increased in popularity over the recent years. There is not a significant amount of research relating to Tik Tok and parasocial relationships. However, research has led to the discovery that Tik Tok can be associated with the Uses and Gratification Theory from Elihu Katz and parasocial relationships are within that theory. A study relating to the Uses and Gratification Theory and Tik Tok, states “Relationship needs and gratifications can be met in different ways on platforms such as TikTok…SNS [social networking sites] can fulfil much of the innate relational needs of adolescent individuals, including the maintenance of current friendships and the building of new social networks”
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(Bossen & Kottasz, 2020, p. 466). Consuming the media that is presented on Tik Tok can lead a person to a sense of fulfillment in the same way a relationship would. Furthermore, Tik Tok is a social media platform that allows for self-discovery and self-enhancement through the short videos that are posted for the viewing of others (Bossen & Kottasz, 2020, p. 467).

Artifact Selection: Fanfiction

The artifacts that will be analyzed to gain a better understanding of parasocial relationships are associated with the concept of fanfiction. To begin, it is important to have a full understanding of what a fanfiction is. Fanfictions are defined as a story that is written by a fan of a television show, book, or other medium of entertainment, that is completely fictional (Barnes, 2015, p. 71). These stories are usually additional episodes or chapters of original work that a fan decided to create. Some fanfictions follow the original storyline of the show, movie, book or perspective that a character plays. Other fanfictions are based on a story or character, but have additions or complete alterations to the story. Fanfictions often include original characters within the television show, book, or movie, but there are times that new characters are added to the story. This can lead to a fan inserting themselves into the story as a new character, or a fictional character created by the fan being added to the story. There are times where the first-person point of view is the perspective of an original character or a fan may include themselves as a new character and write in first person (Barnes, 2015). The many different variations and types of fanfictions have led to a stronger association to parasocial relationships. In turn, “scholars have suggested that fanfiction writers tend to have especially strong parasocial relationships with the characters they choose to write about” (Barnes, 2015, p. 77).

Fanfiction was first created around the 1930s and gained intense popularity with the progression of the internet (Barnes, 2015). These fictional stories were originally created about
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characters from a show, movie, book, or other similar means. However, a large portion of 
fanfictions are now written about creators on YouTube and TikTok, as well as musicians. These 
fictional stories created about YouTubers or Tik Tok stars are considered a new form of 
fanfiction, they are referred to as Real Person Fiction or RPF. They can be explained as “a 
phenomenon wherein individuals write fanfiction about favorite celebrities, rather than favorite 
fictional characters” (Barnes, 2015, p. 77). As a result of fanfiction increasing in popularity, 
there are many sites available where people can publish and access a wide variety of fanfiction. 
A participant of a study reinforces this idea by saying “Feeling closer to my celebrity means I 
read more fanfiction and looking for gif sets on social media on things such as Tumblr” 
(O'Donovan, 2016, p. 56). In addition to Tumblr, a few other sites that are commonly used by 
fanfiction creators and readers will be further analyzed and specific examples will be pulled from 
each site.

One of the main sites used to access many different variations of fanfiction is called 
fanfiction.net. This site was created and founded in 1998 by a person named Xing Li 
(“FanFiction.Net”, 2021). The popularity and content of the site has significantly expanded as 
the years have passed. Fanfiction.net has a traditional set up with limited visual appeal. There are 
five tabs on the homepage of the site that are intended to guide a user through the site, these 
include: browse, just in, community, forum, and betas. The browse tab allows users of the site to 
select a specific form of media that the fanfiction story or crossover (a combination of two 
storylines formed into one storyline) is based on, like from a movie, television show, book, 
game, or another option. The just in tab provides easier access to new or updated versions of 
stories. The community tab directs users to groups that focus on a specific topic or genre. The 
forum tab is where users go to interact with each other, through a chat room, games that have
been created, role playing, and other alternatives. The betas tab is where beta readers can be found. Beta readers are registered test readers who are in the position of an average reader that will view a story before it is posted to provide feedback and advice (Fanlore, n.d.). The fanfiction.net website allows users to publish stories, read stories, and interact with other users.

Wattpad is a website that was set up to function similarly to a social media platform and was created for people to use for reading and writing original stories. This website was created and founded in 2006 by Allen Lau and Ivan Yuen (“Wattpad”, 2021). Wattpad has a set up comparable to fanfiction.net that allows users to access many different stories through tabs. There are two different tabs on the homepage of the site, one is browse and the other is community. Within the browse tab, users can choose to pay for original stories, access free original stories from various genres, or read fanfictions that are classified as a separate genre. The community tab is where users can be directed to enter their story into a contest to receive an award. The fanfiction stories page on Wattpad allows users to redefine their search by selecting tags relating to a desired topic. The tags include: anime, btsfanfic, dream, romance, and many others that people can choose from. Users also have the ability to message other users if they have an account set up with Wattpad.

Tumblr is a social media platform that was created and founded in 2007 by David Karp (“Tumblr”, 2021). The original purpose of the site was for users to post blog content and to social network, similar to most forms of social media. While the site has been used for its intended purpose, many users access the site to post and discuss fanfiction. Tumblr is set up in a specific way, so the fanfiction that is available on the site has to be searched for. To access fanfiction on Tumblr a user must follow the hashtag fanfiction or fanfic in order to see the content within it. On Tumblr, the hashtag fanfiction has more than 460 thousand followers and
the hashtag fanfic has more than 770 thousand followers. An alternative way for users to access fanfiction is by going to specific accounts that regularly create and post fanfiction on their account.

Each fanfiction site allows users to choose the desired genre they want. Varying genres can affect whether a parasocial relationship is possible, impact the intensity of the relationship, and influence the type of parasocial relationship that will develop. This relates to Tukachinksy’s (2011) discussion of genre, content, and media personae having an effect on the development of a parasocial relationship. Fanfiction.net, Wattpad, and Tumblr all allow users to narrow their fanfiction search by selecting a genre within a tab or through the use of a hashtag. This supports the idea that these sites encourage new parasocial relationships and strengthen existing parasocial relationships through fanfiction.

Currently a significant amount of media attention has been centered around K-pop, k-drama, anime, and other forms of media entertainment that are associated with Asian culture. Anime is one of the genres and topics included on fanfiction.net, Wattpad, and Tumblr. The progression of anime has impacted parasocial relationships and fanfictions based on those relationships, especially for people in the United States (Ramasubramanian & Kornfield, 2012, p. 204). Scholars have concluded that “U.S. fans have responded to this genre by developing strong fan communities in which audience members participate in message board communities, create fan-fictions, fan-art, and series reviews, as well as attending conventions and cosplaying” (Ramasubramanian & Kornfield, 2012, p. 204). This clearly represents the strong parasocial relationships and the fan unity that result from the consumption of anime and anime related media.
Out of the three sites that are being analyzed, K-drama is the most common on Tumblr. K-drama encourages parasocial relationships due to the intense situations that are often included within it. An article discussing k-drama and parasocial relationships states, “when viewers invest time immersing themselves in a drama series, tragedies such as the deaths of main characters would cause genuine shock and grief among its loyal viewers” (Hassim et al., 2019, p. 81). The feelings of shock or grief an individual has relating to their parasocial relationship can be expressed through writing fanfiction. This can be associated with the idea that “fanfiction can be seen as the externalization of the things that most readers wonder and imagine while engaged with a fictional story” (Barnes, 2015, p. 72). The growing popularity of K-pop, k-drama, and anime have led to an increase in parasocial relationships developing and fanfictions being written about the characters and celebrities within those topics.

Romance and intimacy are genres that many fanfictions are often centered around. Romantic or intimate fanfiction can be associated with the concept of imagined intimacy within a parasocial relationship (Greenwood & Long, 2011). Romance and intimacy in fanfiction tend to be related to physical attraction and parasocial relationships forming due to that attraction (Tukachinsky, 2011, p. 77). A fanfiction written by the user “creepymusic24” on Wattpad accurately displays romance and intimacy and how it connects to parasocial relationships. The fanfiction they wrote is written about a popular YouTube creator, Colby Brock. It is a series with three different parts. To summarize the plot of the story, a girl is kidnapped by a man and held hostage in his home, the man’s son is Colby Brock. The girl who was kidnapped begins to develop feelings for Colby and he develops mutual feelings for the girl. Within this fanfiction there are multiple examples of romance and intimacy. In the first part of the series, they wrote “I laugh a little and he grabs my hand...we walk out on it and sit next to each other...As I listen to
his voice flow through his lips, my feelings for him show to me more.” In the third part of the series, the author wrote

I grab his hand and felt this warmth I’ve been missing. “Thank you for checking up on me” I say and then I let his hand go. “Always” he smiles and she drags him away. I couldn’t help but feel that me and Colby had something there but I let it go.

Based on these examples, this fanfiction is intended to support a romantic parasocial relationship with the YouTuber, Colby Brock.

Fanfiction often has two different types of romantic relationships that occur within them. One of those is referred to as fluff, which is a fanfiction that has a happy and pleasing ending (Barnes, 2015, p. 75). The other type is referred to as angst, which is a fanfiction that involves a lot of heartbreak and the ending isn’t as desirable (Barnes, 2015, p. 75). The fanfiction written about Colby Brock can be classified as a fluff fanfiction. This is because this example has a happy ending; the girl and Colby end up professing their love and form a romantic relationship.

Fanfictions allow the fan to take control of the parasocial relationship and direct it in a way that satisfies them (Barnes, 2015, p. 75). This fanfiction example ends in a way that pleases any fans of Colby Brock that desire intimacy and romantic involvement with him.

As previously mentioned, on fanfiction.net there is a forum section that allows online social interactions, chat rooms, role playing, and other similar options. The following example relates to role playing, which has been observed as a continuous fanfiction that is written by multiple people. Barnes (2015) explains that “fanfiction may be the direct result of Role Playing Games (RPGs), where two or more people pretend to be different fictional characters interacting with each other and then transcribe the outcome in story form” (p. 72-73). The example is found within the forum tab, in the topic of books, and is based off of the Twilight Saga. The people
who are participating in the role play, choose a specific character to play from Twilight and then interact in the form of written communication with other people participating as characters. The host added a disclaimer to let participants know some guidelines of the forum. They state

These cannons are not paired like in the books. Rather, they remain single until they find someone, and if that someone for your character happens to be the one he/she was originally paired with in the book, so be it (ie Emmett falls for Rosalie). The characters are also whatever species you choose. (ie if you want Emmett to be a werewolf) The only thing I would like is for the characters to retain the personality Stephanie Meyer gave them.

This allows the participants to play the role of whoever they choose and live in the position of that character, while also allowing participants to form and be in a relationship with the character that they desire to pursue.

This example from fanfiction.net connects with parasocial relationships in two different ways. One of the ways it connects is people being able to play as a character and live life the way the character does. The other way is that participants form romantic relationships with other characters as they role play. This enhances the original parasocial relationship by giving individuals the sense of being in a relationship with the characters through active communication. The participants of the role play are benefited by living the life of someone else and forming a fictional relationship that provides them satisfaction. The idea of the participants living the life in the position of a character or celebrity connects to Cohen (2014), where he states “evidence exists that suggests that we become attached not to characters that are similar to us but rather to those characters that represent what we desire to be like” (p. 147). The participants get to play the role of a character they wish to be like in this fanfiction role playing
example. Additionally, it is likely that the participants involved in the role play have already developed a parasocial relationship with the character they aim to pursue. When the participant has the ability to interact with someone playing the role of the character that they have a parasocial relationship with, it provides them a sense of satisfaction that a traditional relationship would. This is linked with Social Exchange Theory and the idea of mutual self-disclosure because the participants gain the benefits of a traditional relationship through the interactions and disclosure they have in this fanfiction role playing example (Griffin et al., 2018; Tukachinsky, 2011).

The various fanfiction sites that are available to people allow users many options, one of those is personal requests. The request can be for a specific character or celebrity, a specific show or movie, along with many other preferences. The following example is a fanfiction that was written based on a request through Tumblr. The request that was sent in to the fanfiction writer reads “Can you please write something about hotch comforting the reader (male preferably but gender neutral is okay too) whos going through a depressive episode. I just want to be comforted by him right now” (Tumblr moment, 2021). The person who requested it is referring to Aaron “Hotch” Hotchner who is a character that plays in the television show, Criminal Minds. This example connects to the idea that individuals often turn to parasocial relationships when they are suffering from mental health issues (Bernhold & Metzger, 2020). The individual who wrote the request is clearly suffering with an intense period of depression. They want a character that they have developed a parasocial relationship with to comfort them in order to ease the intensity. This relates to the ideas of Bernhold and Metzger (2020), that forming a parasocial relationship leads to depression levels being decreased (p. 175). This example can also be connected to the Social Exchange Theory due to the rewards and benefits that users gain
from the parasocial relationship (Griffin et al., 2018). This individual is gaining the support and comfort they need from a fanfiction that is based on one of their parasocial relationships and is directed toward their mental health struggles.

Tumblr functions as a traditional social media platform, with likes, comments, followers, mentions, direct messages, posts with or without images, and personalized profiles. Users post fanfiction directly on the site, but there are also a lot of posts related to how fanfiction made someone feel, their connection to a character, and other similar posts. A Tumblr user made a post discussing what it is like to write fanfiction and how they feel when they are doing it. The post is written in the format of a blog and they include short sentences to describe their emotions, like

i’m a genius. i’m cringe...this is not in character. it doesn’t matter that it’s not in character because these are my characters now...i’m seeking validation. i’m projecting my own personal problems onto this story and i’m barely hiding it (Tumblr moment, 2021)

Researchers have concluded that writers of fanfiction often feel compelled to shift or change the character they are writing about in order to take control of the parasocial relationship they have or justify the character because they feel the author didn’t (Barnes, 205). This is why the author claims that the characters are theirs now. Also, this post supports the idea that people often turn to parasocial relationships and fanfiction when they are dealing with mental health challenges.

This individual’s posts, along with many other posts by them, exhibit anxious thoughts that seem to relate to their self-esteem, which seems to be common amongst fanfiction users and authors. “Current research demonstrates that parasocial relationships can have self-enhancing benefits for low self-esteem people that they do not receive in real relationships” (Derrick et al., 2008, p. 276). It is evident that this individual has parasocial relationships with the characters in their
fanfictions, which indicates that they feel that they are not good enough and neither are the
fanfictions they have written.

This Wattpad user, with the username “SAPNVPS”, has a lot of activity within their
conversations and has written various different fanfictions. Based on their conversations on
Wattpad, they have parasocial relationships with many characters and celebrities from the media
they consume. Their conversations specifically indicate that they have a strong relationship with
a character from a show they enjoy, Buffy from The Vampire Slayer. One of the fanfictions they
have written is based on Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Teen Wolf. Within the introduction of the
fanfiction series, they state “I am so attached to buffy and Teen Wolf so this plot is honestly
perfect for me and it’s so fun to write.” (Wattpad moment, 2021). This signifies that they have a
strong parasocial relationship with Buffy and the characters from Teen Wolf, to the point where
they feel an attachment to them. Writing a fanfiction based on Buffy the Vampire Slayer and
Teen Wolf continues the story and allows them to maintain their attachment and relationship.
This suggests that this writer may experience attachment anxiety and is fearful of losing the
parasocial relationship they have developed with these characters. They are aiming to have
frequent interactions with these characters, similar to how people function in real life
relationships who suffer from attachment anxiety (Bond, 2021). This individual can alleviate
their attachment anxiety through parasocial relationships and fanfictions related to them because
they have the ability to watch the television shows or read the fanfiction when they feel that they
need contact or interaction (Greenwood and Long, 2011, p. 279). By writing fanfiction about
their favorite character, they can prolong the parasocial relationship in a new storyline and
without having to watch the original show.
People who are challenged by their own identity often develop parasocial relationships, especially those within the LGBTQ+ community. The following example correlates to that idea a significant amount because it accurately demonstrates why people within the LGBTQ+ community are involved in fanfiction and how their parasocial relationships connect. This example is found through Tumblr under the account “BeybladeFanBoy.” Their profile biography page indicates that they are a fan of Beyblade, but more specifically the characters Ryuga and Reiji from Beyblade. Within one of their posts, they explain many of their thoughts and reasonings associated with being a fan of Beyblade and how they perceive some of the characters and identify with them. They begin by stating “I’m in the LGBT community myself and tend to have a habit of projecting onto my favourite characters.” Further into their discussion, they begin to discuss how they perceive their favorite character’s sexuality and gender identity, and how they identify with said characters because of that. They briefly explain how their own sexuality connects to one of their favorite characters by saying

...as for the asexual part, I’m asexual myself and feel like I sort of unintentionally wrote him that way in Ryuga x King. As an asexual, I find myself not really caring about people’s physical appearances and rarely developing crushes, both of which apply to Ryuga in Ryuga x King...so I like the idea that that remains true in his orientation.

In order to feel more supported and understood, this user unconsciously perceives and develops a character with one of their own characteristics (Bond, 2018). Additionally, they discuss the personal benefits they gain from incorporating the gender identity they perceive from a character. This user notes that they are transgender, and follows that note by saying

Kyoya is one of my favourite characters. He has this obsession with proving that he’s strong and independent that I really identify with. Like if I’m not proving I’m a man
every single second, I get paranoid that people will doubt me and start misgendering me…(Tumblr moment, 2021)

The user goes on to write,

...and avoids the home he canonically has to a degree...like he’s avoiding an unsupportive home...honestly having one of my long time favourite characters having this similarity to myself has helped me become more comfortable with my own identity. (Tumblr moment, 2021)

This user has developed parasocial relationships with these characters through perceived similarity and identification, which pertains to some of the many reasons these fictional relationships are developed. Researchers have concluded that “attraction and perceived similarity are two principal antecedents of PSR development” (Bond, 2018, p.459). This idea is heavily associated with members of the LGBTQ+ community because they often lack the necessary support in the relationships they have around them or do not feel comfortable with their identity.

Tik Tok and YouTube celebrities have a major influence on fanfictions and the parasocial relationships within them (Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Bérail et al., 2019). Entertainment formats like Tik Tok and YouTube encourage stronger parasocial relationships due to the wide variety of features available (O'Donovan, 2016). This idea is supported by the statement that “YouTube is the tool that consumers use to digitally self-construct, self-present, and parasocially develop social relations” (Chen, 2016, p. 252). An example found on the website Wattpad exemplifies the impact that Tik Tok and YouTube have on parasocial relationships and fanfiction. This brings us back to “creepymusic24.” A portion of creepymusic24’s fanfictions are associated with different characters from shows, movies, and books, while others are related to YouTube and Tik Tok stars. However, there is a difference between the fanfictions with real life celebrities and the ones
relating to fictional characters that they have written. The fanfictions creepymusic24 has written about real life celebrities have a first-person point of view and the reader is instructed to put their name into the story. The user includes “Y/N” in all of the real person celebrity-based fanfictions, meaning to put “your name” as they read. This relates to the new concept of real person fiction because the fanfiction is based on a real person and the reader is encouraged to include themselves in the story (Barnes, 2015). Fanfictions that allow the fan and reader to insert themselves into these fictionalized stories make parasocial relationships stronger (O'Donovan, 2016, p. 55-57).

One of creepymusic24’s most interesting stories is about a Tik Tok star by the name of Chase Hudson, called Rival. It is evident that creepymusic24 wrote this fanfiction for people who have developed a parasocial relationship with Hudson. The fanfiction allows users to maintain the fictional relationship with Hudson, especially because this fanfiction allows the reader to insert themselves into the story (O’Donovan, 2016). Bossen and Kottasz (2020) confirm that Tik Tok is used “to fulfil needs for praise and social recognition as well as self-identity creation and fame-seeking desires, plus relationship maintenance and building” (p. 473). All of the fulfillments that were mentioned are related to the many reasons that people develop parasocial relationships, meaning that Tik Tok is a primary location for the development of parasocial relationships. People who gain the fulfillments from their Tik Tok parasocial relationships are able to take those a step further by reading or writing fanfiction.

The idea that the writer encourages the reader to insert their own name into the story suggests that these fanfiction examples intensify parasocial relationships that people have developed, while also indicating that the writer has likely developed parasocial relationships with the celebrities that are included. The user creepymusic24 has made it clear that they are a fan of
Colby Brock and other media entertainment through their biography on their Wattpad profile. Their biography includes the names of people and groups that they are a fan of, and then they note that they are a “Full time fangirl.” As previously noted, this user dedicated an entire series to Colby Brock due to the parasocial relationship they have developed with him. This is complementary to the idea that “parasocial relationships may be a reinforcement of YouTube addiction alongside other distal causes” (Bérail et al., 2019, p. 191). The parasocial relationship and YouTube addiction can be strengthened through the imaginative engagement that is held through the form of a fanfiction (Barnes, 2015, p. 73).

The COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine have had a significant impact on parasocial relationships and fanfiction. This idea is supported by an example found on Tumblr. A Tumblr user sent a request in to a fanfiction writer that said

Could i request a comfort scenario with Toshinori. I recently got tested positive with covid, i don't have a fever or coughing fits but i am suffering with severe migraines, chills, aches and pains, pressure and tightness in my chest and trouble breathing and this pain is so bad and I'm just very anxious and scared cuz of the isolation (Tumblr moment, 2021)

This individual is suffering major effects from the COVID-19 pandemic and the quarantine that is a result of it. It is evident that they are turning to fanfiction centered around a parasocial relationship they have in order to gain stability and consistently in a period of isolation and stress (Bond, 2021). Woznicki, Arriaga, Caporale-Berkowitz, and Parent (2021) note that “parasocial relationships may have served as a reminder of the existing positive social connections missing due to COVID-19” (p. 234). It seems that this Tumblr user would be benefitted from their
parasocial relationship during this challenging time and it would provide them with a positive social connection when they are unable to access that in real life.

In summary, parasocial relationships and fanfiction go hand in hand with each other. As new forms of media have progressed, so have parasocial relationships and fanfiction that is based off of those relationships. This research project leads to the conclusion that the Uses and Gratification Theory needs to be reanalyzed with the newer forms of media that are available to determine if there are any new discoveries. It would be especially useful to reanalyze the theory in the context of parasocial relationships and fanfiction in order to gain a better understanding. Regarding implications, it is important to consider how the concepts of parasocial relationships and fanfictions can be related to other aspects of communication. Specifically considering how these relate with various social interactions and social constructivism, given that the progression of fanfiction has led to a community being centered around it. The study of the connection between parasocial relationships and fanfiction is something that needs to be further explored due to the major advances in technology and digital media.
References


Appendix A

Fanfiction and Blog Post Examples Used in Analysis

https://www.fanfiction.net/topic/100962/52823774/1/Cannon-Characters

https://www.wattpad.com/779553556-falling-for-my-kidnappers-son-taken

https://ssa-atlas-hoodrat.tumblr.com/post/667234049309491200/can-you-please-write-something-about-hotch

https://lovely-v.tumblr.com/post/656634951809302529/writing-fanfiction-is-just-im-being-so-creative

https://www.wattpad.com/user/SAPNVPS/conversations

https://beybladefanboy.tumblr.com/post/664145225340551168/my-beyblade-lgbt-headcanons

https://www.wattpad.com/story/202717598-rival