

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of parasocial relationships with male celebrities, such as Justin Bieber and Harry Styles, on young women's self esteem and romantic expectations. Through a focus group of women who were a part of these fandoms in their early adolescence, this study examines how these parasocial connections formed their personal development.

The findings of this focus group show that participants reported increased self-awareness, emotional growth, and confidence. In addition, participants described growing in understanding of these male celebrities as they entered adulthood. Based on these findings, it appears that parasocial bonds can play a positive role in shaping a person's identity in their earlier years.

The study acknowledges the pressure adolescents face in comparing themselves to the often idealized portrayals of celebrities, which can adversely affect their self-image and perception of relationships. It also considers the potential beneficial aspects of Parasocial relationships.

Literature Review

The term Parasocial Relationships (PSR) was originally defined by Horton and Wohl (1956) as a result of the rising technology, where “radio, television, and the movies...give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer” (Horton and Wohl, p. 215). People often form parasocial relationships with media figures and are defined as the “seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). Just as people form social relationships with others, they can similarly develop bonds with media figures (Erickson et al., 2018), and scholars have argued that the bond involves cognitive, affective and behavioral responses to the media (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008).

Parasocial relationships often provide a place for audiences and media figures to play the role of romantic partners, though not always in a healthy manner (Mostaghimi, 2019, p. 7). In a cross-sectional survey geared towards young women reminiscing on their teen parasocial crushes, Erickson and Dal Cin (2017) found that those who had these parasocial romantic attachments in adolescence had more idealized and heteronormative ideas about romance and a greater need for passionate romantic love (Mostaghimi, 2019, p. 7). They claimed that this wanting of passionate romantic love has positive and negative effects- on one side, passionate romantic feelings are an important part of emotional development but can still take a toll, especially on adolescent girls.

FROM FANS TO FOUNDATIONS

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Methodology

The population of interest for this study consists of Gen Z women, aged 18-25, who are active participants in fan communities or have been exposed to parasocial relationships (PSRs) with male celebrities since a young age. Research from (Furman & Shaffer), shows that early romantic experiences can shape long-term romantic relationship satisfaction, identity development, and overall well-being and women in these age ranges experienced parasocial relations in their adolescent years (2003). Acknowledging the limitations identified in the literature review— where existing focus groups predominantly feature intense fans from diverse cultures and backgrounds, spanning ages 18-30 and the researchers opted for a more in-depth focused group.

RQ1: Is there a correlation between parasocial relationships with male celebrities and young women's romantic expectations?

In the participants' younger years, it was common that everyone looked up to their favorite male celebrity in a positive light when it came to their expectations for a relationship. They would see the grand gestures and outward kindness that was shown in the media, which then led to some unrealistic expectations of love, but also helped some of them raise their standards for love. The participants craved the sweet and kind gentleman that was portrayed in front of them.

RQ2: Is there a correlation between a higher level of parasocial relationships between young women and male celebrities and lower levels of self-esteem?

A common theme the participants related to was connection through fandom. In their younger years, and even continuing on into adulthood, the participants felt seen, were able to relate to those who were also “fangirls,” and were able to make genuine connections because of a common male celebrity interest. Relatability boosted the participants' self-esteem, especially in their earlier years. Participants also often felt empowered by the celebrities they had a parasocial relationship with. Not only did the celebrities play a part in the way they felt empowered, but the connection through fandom also helped give that extra push for women empowerment. This essentially helped the participants gain higher levels of self-esteem going into adulthood.

Methodology Cont.

We asked participants the following questions.

1. When you were younger, how did being a fan of Justin Bieber or Harry Styles affect your mood or self- perception day to day?
2. Were there any specific songs, moments, or media appearances that made you feel especially good or not so good about yourself?
3. Looking back now, how would you describe your self-esteem during your peak fandom years?
4. Has your perception of your connection with JB/HS changed as you've gotten older?
5. How would you compare your self-esteem today to how you feel about yourself back then?
6. Do you think your parasocial connection with JB/HS has had a lasting impact, positive or negative, on your self esteem or how you relate to others?
7. When you were younger, how did JB/HS's public image or relationships influence your view of what romantic partner should be like?
8. Do you think your parasocial connection with them shaped what you looked for or hoped for in a romantic relationship?
9. Even now, do you ever compare romantic interests to the way JB/HS is portrayed? How does that affect your expectations or experiences?

Results

As the participants' stepped into adulthood, they started to recognize the flaws that came within the eyes of the media. They realized that not every celebrity relationship is perfect and lives up to the expectations they developed when they were younger. A majority of celebrity relationships have been and are for the image, but the participants recognize that there needs to be private and genuine moments in a meaningful relationship. Even though they recognized more flaws in the celebrity relationships they idolized as they got older, the participants were able to set apart the negative media standpoints and still carry the high standards and expectations they have for love that they developed in their adolescent years. Another common thing that the participants experienced was comparison. They would tend to compare themselves to the girls that the celebrities hang out with. They felt as if they could never live up to the expectation or looks of a girl that got picked to be with a celebrity. This would essentially make them want to be “cooler” and make themselves look “prettier.” These factors did lead to some insecurities in their younger years. Participants recognized that as they grew up, those comparisons did not necessarily affect them anymore. Instead of developing a connection to the male celebrities through idolization like they did when they were younger, they now find themselves connecting with these male celebrities emotionally in their adulthood. Their perspectives had shifted to sympathizing with the celebrities and recognizing what they go through. The participants also recognize what is propaganda and what is real when it comes to celebrities, therefore not necessarily affecting their self-esteem in adulthood. Their maturity helped gauge a realistic perspective on their favorite male celebrities.

Future Research

Future research could include a larger sample size, different ethnicities, and a larger range of ages to determine if our results are strictly because of our variables (romantic expectations, self-esteem, and parasocial relationships). Holding multiple focus groups could provide a more consistent and steady outlook for common themes. A quantitative study could also be beneficial to provide a more analytical and statistical point of view.

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Conclusion

This qualitative study provided insight on how parasocial relationships with male celebrities influence romantic expectations and self-esteem in young women by conducting a focus group, with women ages 18-22, to develop an in depth look into the identity of an obsessed “fangirl” and the male celebrities' fanbase. The participants were able to provide the researchers with notable information that further explained the relationships between our variables. As these women grew out of their parasocial romantic relationships and shifted into adulthood, the intensity of their parasocial relationship decreased while their empathy for celebrities increased. Although, their expectations for a sweet kind of love started at a young age and never seemed to stray from them. Instead of finding as many negative implications of romantic expectations and self-esteem, like from Bennett's studies, the majority of the conversation turned more toward a sense of self and having a community while growing up. Although comparison at a young age was a factor from developing parasocial relationships with male celebrities, being involved in fandoms inspired these women over the years to stay true to who they are.

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