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## PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH MEDIA FIGURES IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE

*Abstract:* This study examined the influence of media figures on preadolescent development. Four hundred and thirty preadolescents completed measures of parasocial relationship and various indicators of media preferences. Findings suggest that perceived similarity, peer's influence, and TV viewing hours predicts variance in parasocial relationship.

The results are discussed in light of their contribution to the knowledge on the determinants in the choice of a preferred media figure.

Keywords: parasocial relationship, media figures, early adolescence

### Introduction

The term parasocial relationship was coined by Horton and Wohl (1956) to describe a unilateral relationship with media characters. The authors defined this relationship as a form of intimacy at a distance, a pseudo-friendship with a media character. The indicators used to describe these relationships, in fact, are similar to those used for social relationships with actual people. Television fans are unhappy if their favourite character commits an error, they miss him when he is far away and they cannot to see him again, they want to meet him in person and learn as much information about him as possible (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985).

The parasocial relationship was initially outlined as a substitute for compensatory and actual social relations, a surrogate for face-to-face interpersonal relationship. It was generally established by individuals who had the need to make up for the lack of opportunity for real contact. The deficiency-based perspective assumes that parasocial interaction result form a combination of personality characteristics and environmental influences. According to this paradigm, subjects engage in high television consumption and high parasocial interaction because they seek compensation for an impoverished social life resulting from certain personality characteristics (Tsao, 1996).

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Although the parasocial relationship is no longer attributed only to socially isolated individuals (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985), some researchers (Cohen, 2004; Theran, Newberg, & Gleason, 2010) suggest that parasocial interaction results from a general process of emotional bonding with a person rather than from compensation-seeking. McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran's Absorption-addiction model (2002) explained the type of interaction between subjects and celebrities: the first stage, named Entertainment-social, reflects the social aspects of celebrity worship; fans are attracted to a favourite character because of their perceived ability to capture attention; the second stage is characterized by Intense-personale feelings, and it reflects intensive feelings about celebrities; the third stage, named Bordeline-Pathological, is characterized by individual's social pathological behaviours .

Giles and Maltby (2004) have also explored the relationship between autonomy and parasocial relationship in adolescents. Their results indicated that the main function of parasocial relationship was the extension of social network: a group of pseudo-friends may be to the user a method of reflection and discussion. The attachment to celebrity helps the disinvestment from parental figures.

*Aims of the study and the Hypotheses for the Current Study.* The main aim of this paper is to analyze the role of celebrities in the construction of the identity of early adolescents. We want to explore if the parasocial relationship is related to demographic variables such as sex, age and socio-economic status. The effects of these variables are rarely mentioned in the literature and when they are, non significant results are usually reported (Greenwood, 2008; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985).

We want also to investigate the relationship between parasocial relationship and parents and peer's influence. We predict that many preadolescents will begin to feel a need to conform to the values of the group in order to fit in and that this can be reflected in their character's preferences. Although parents continue to affect the preadolescent's inner world, peer relations play a large role in the preadolescent's social-cognitive and affective development (Laghi et al., 2011). Thus, parasocial relationships, defined as an enduring affective disposition that incorporates an affective evaluation of media character (Theran, Newberg, & Gleason, 2010), would be more strongly related to peer enjoyment than parent's.

Finally, we intend to verify if variables such as TV viewing hours, the perceived similarity with the celebrity, the temporal stability of the preference, and the communication regarding celebrities with parents and the peer group predict the parasocial relationship. This hypothesis is consistent with studies that found a relationship between being exposed to television characters, personal needs, and having a tendency to identify with them (Greenwood, 2008).

## *Methods*

### *A. Participants and Procedure*

The target sample consists of 430 Italian preadolescents aged 10 to 13 years attending middle school in the center of Italy (Lazio). In total, 230 were male (53.5 %) and 200 were female (46.5%). The mean age was 11.9 y (s.d. 0.7). The subjects

were attending three different grades.

Participation was obtained through an informed consent procedure that required active consent from both students and parents. The participants were instructed to think about their preferred celebrity at home for one week and then paste in a diary some objects related to him. After one week, the questionnaires were administered in the classroom during a regular class period. The questionnaires took approximately 30 min. to complete. Instructions stated that the questionnaires were voluntary and that responses were anonymous and confidential. All students responded to the same questionnaire packet.

### *Measures*

*Demographics.* An Identifying Information Form was used to collect demographic information, such as age, gender, educational history, and socio-economic status. The socio-economic status of one's family (SES) was defined by family income and education (Hollingshead, 1975). Family income was defined on an 8-point scale, ranging from 1=700 euro or less to 8=4 000 euros or more per month. Family education was measured asking the highest level of parents' education on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1=elementary school to 7=master's degree. Since there was a high positive correlation between the parents ( $r=.81$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), we created a single measure of educational level calculating the mean between mothers' and fathers' educational levels (Hauser & Warren, 1997).

*Media habits.* Following the example of previous researchers (Greenwood, 2008) participants responded to questions regarding frequency of TV viewing hours on a typical day, who their favorite celebrity was, what genre they considered this show to be, and whether they typically viewed this show alone, with friends, or with family.

*Attitudes toward one's favourite celebrity.* Participants were instructed to respond to some questions about attitudes toward their preferred celebrity. Specifically, a question assessed perceived similarity ('Do you look like your preferred celebrity?'; with two response options 'yes' and 'no'); two questions assessed parent's and peer enjoyment (Do your parents like your preferred celebrity? ...and do your friends like him/her? on a scale of 1= did not like him/her to 5= liked him/her very much ); two items assessed the communication regarding their preferred celebrity with parents and peers (How often do you speak about your preferred character with your parents? ...and with your friends? on a scale of 1= Never to 5= Always); one item assessed the temporal stability of the preference (How long have you liked your preferred celebrity? expressed in months). The participants were instructed to paste in a diary the objects related to preferred celebrity, and explain their selection.

*Parasocial Interaction Scale.* Because preadolescents become attached to specific television celebrities, the parasocial interaction scale was completed in reference to a celebrity named by each respondent as his or her favorite character. Respondents were asked to pick a character from any TV show, thereby including fictitious characters, hosts, newscasters, or other types of TV personalities. They were then asked to respond to 20 five-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 (strongly

disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). These statements were taken from the version of the parasocial interaction scale developed by Rubin and McHugh (1987). Items described behaviors and feelings toward a TV character, such as “My favorite character makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends”. Parasocial total score was computed by summing the items and calculating the mean score. This single dimension is a valid and reliable measure (reliability in the present study is  $\alpha = 0,81$ ).

## Results

### *Sex, age and socioeconomic differences toward parasocial relationship*

90% of the participants listed a character played by a human actor or a singer as their favourite, and only 10% of the sample listed an animated cartoon character.

Preadolescents showed a wide range of selection possibilities, while indicating their favorite television celebrity, totaling 210 characters. The most commonly media figure was Brad Pitt (N= 26), followed by Lady Gaga (N=10), and Madonna (N=8).

We conducted a 2 (age: 10-11 and 12-13) x 2 (sex) x 3 (high, medium, and low socioeconomic status) MANOVA on parasocial interaction. The analysis revealed the main effect for sex (Wilks's Lambda = 0.93;  $F_{(1,428)} = 10.62$ ;  $p < 0,01$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.07$ ) and a no significant effect for age ( $F_{(1,428)} = 0.66$ ;  $p = \text{ns.}$ ), socioeconomic status ( $F_{(2,427)} = 2.04$ ;  $p = \text{ns.}$ ), and interaction effect for parasocial interaction dimension (Wilks's Lambda = 0.96;  $p = \text{n.s.}$ ). Sex differences revealed that females showed a higher mean score ( $M = 2.83$ ;  $SD = 0.76$ ) than males ( $M = 2.57$ ;  $SD = 0.86$ ) on the parasocial relationship.

### *Parasocial Interactions and media habits: relationship with parents' and peer enjoyment*

Pearson correlations were performed to examine the relationship between PSI total score and the number of the objects related to their preferred celebrity, parent's and peer enjoyment, and temporal stability of the preference.

Results indicate that an intense parasocial relationship with celebrities is linked with the number of the objects related to them ( $r = .64$ ;  $p < .01$ ), and with peer's enjoyment ( $r = .28$ ;  $p < .05$ ), with the exception of parent's enjoyment ( $r = .08$ ;  $p = \text{n.s.}$ ), and temporal stability of preference ( $r = .06$ ;  $p = \text{n.s.}$ ).

### *Predicting Attitude toward TV celebrities*

Next, using hierarchical multiple regression, we further examined the associations between parasocial interaction, parent's and peer enjoyment, communication regarding the preferred celebrity with parents and peers, perceived similarity, and temporal stability of preference. In the model, we entered sex, and SES in the first step. The perceived similarity dimension (dummy variable; 1= Yes; 0= No), temporal stability of the preference, and TV viewing hours were entered in the second step; parent's enjoyment and communication in the third step, peer's enjoyment and communication in the fourth step. The inclusion of the perceived similarity dimension ( $\beta = .23$ ;  $P < .001$ ), TV viewing hours ( $\beta = .11$ ;  $P < .05$ ), the influence of peers, enjoyment ( $\beta = .21$ ;  $P < .001$ ) and communication ( $\beta = .18$ ;  $P < .05$ ),

in the model increased the variance accounted for by 16%. These dimensions were significantly associated with parasocial relationship in the expected directions.

## Discussion

The present findings provide additional support to the notion that parasocial relationship should be seen as a relationship that helps preadolescents to make a gradual movement toward autonomy (Giles & Maltby, 2004). As stated in the literature (Maltby et al., 2004; Greenwood, 2008), there is a strong relationship between PSI, number of objects, and peers' enjoyment, with the exception of parent's enjoyment.

This result can be seen as a general confirmation of the hypothesis that parent–peer influence is situational. Peers indirectly influence norms and beliefs about preferred characters and parents are not able to influence the kind of characters with whom their children affiliate (Laghi et al., 2011). Temporal stability does not appear to be connected to parasocial relationship. It's a complex matter to explain this lack of connection. We can hypothesize that the values of the celebrity are influential but transitory, particularly during preadolescence, because parasocial relationships do not require the same kind of emotional investment as real life relationships.

The analysis revealed only a main effect for sex with girls having a higher mean score than boys on the parasocial relationship dimension. However, data concerning sex differences are not univocal as most of the authors do not stress significant sex differences. Maltby et al. (2005) suggest that although boys and girls do not differ in parasocial relationships, they do differ in the *type* of interaction they create.

If a parasocial relationship with a celebrity can be a common experience among preadolescents, it is important to analyse the identification and idealization, as signs characterized by intimacy and a strong desire to maintain and strengthen the relationship with a preferred character.

Data show that a number of predictors can explain parasocial relationship in preadolescence. Parasocial relationships were most strongly influenced by perceived similarity. Austin and coll. (2006) explains that, if a TV character corresponds closely to a personally relevant reference group, preadolescents will be more likely to wish to emulate the portrayal because imitating the models' behaviours will bring positive results. Similar justifications can be used to explain the relationship between the number of objects and parasocial relationships.

Another relevant predictor is peer's influence. Peers are primary socialization agents; they influence preadolescents through modelling and experiences. TV characters encourage preadolescents to use their values to communicate with peers and to share common experiences. The opinions of peers play an increasingly important role, especially from the age of 11 (i.e., from the reflective stage), and the norms and values that are created in specific peer groups function as a filter to evaluate TV characters (Maltby et al., 2005).

Data suggests that preadolescents who more often watch television believe more in TV characters. According to cultivation theory (Gardner, 2008) television

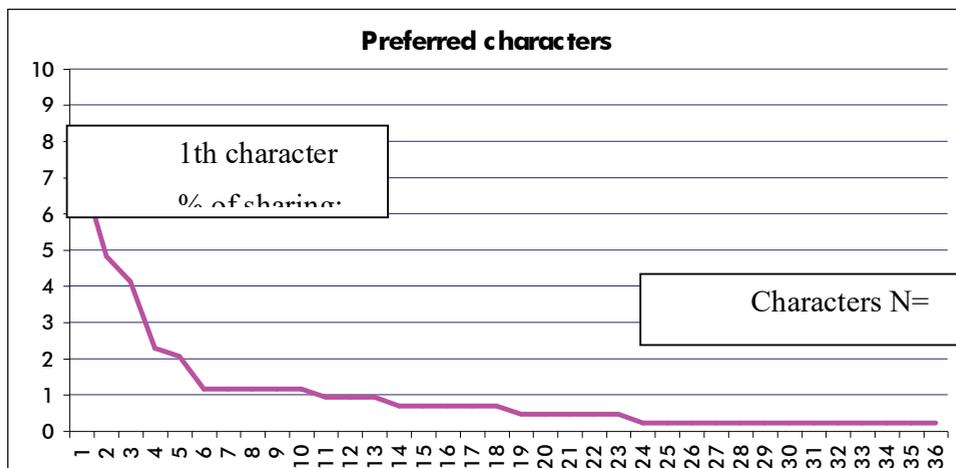
„cultivates“ a distorted worldview in which the individuals' perception of social reality resembles that which is portrayed on TV: the larger the amount of media exposure, the stronger the credence that television shows reality as it is.

Although this study gives an important contribution to the literature concerning the role of parasocial relationship in preadolescence, some limitations must be considered when drawing conclusions. One of this study is the use of self-report measures that are influenced by social desirability. As data were cross-sectional in nature, causal relationships between parasocial relationships and media habits cannot be inferred. However, this study also gives a contribution to the literature regarding future research involving the function of preferred character in the construction of identity in preadolescence. Furthermore, knowledge on the cognitive and affective determinants in the choice of a character could also contribute to the creation of future prevention programs for at-risk preadolescents.

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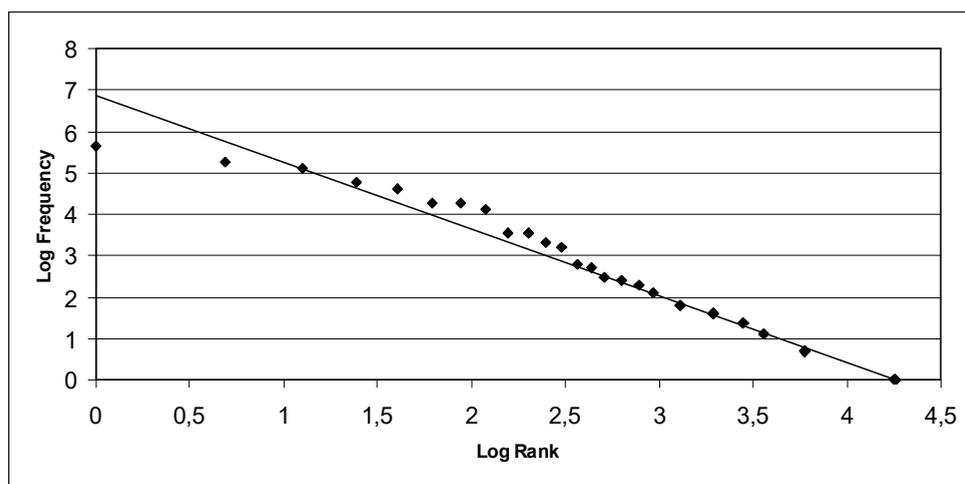
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**Figure 1.**

General distribution of characters preferred by preadolescents (total sample), in percentage. Note the high percentage of preadolescents with a non-shared TV character preference („long tail“).



**Figure 2.**

General distribution of characters preferred by preadolescents. Scatterplot of the data, with the axes being log of rank order and log for frequency). As the points are close to a single straight line, the distribution follows a Zipf's law.

## PARASOCIJALNI ODNOSI SA MEDIJSKIM LIČNOSTIMA U RANOJ ADOLESCENCIJI

### Rezime

U studiji je proučavan uticaj medijskih ličnosti na razvoj dece u preadolescentskom dobu. Ispitanici preadolescentskog doba (430), popunili su upitnike o parasocijalnim odnosima i različitim indikatorima medijskih preferencija. Rezultati sugeriraju da su opažena sličnost, uticaj vršnjaka i vreme provedeno u gledanju televizije, prediktori razlike u parasocijalnom odnosu. Rezultati su diskutovani u svetlu njihovog doprinosa u saznavanju faktora koji određuju izbor preferirane medijske ličnosti.

*Cljučne reči: parasocijalni odnos, medijske ličnosti. Rana adolescencija*