Research Paper

Understanding the Political Parasocial Encounter

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ABSTRACT: *To test our hypothesis that more personal social media content leads to greater parasocial interaction, we created an online survey asking respondents to report their feelings towards a fictitious politician on the basis of his social media profile. Responses were analysed using Python libraries Pandas and Scikit Learn. The results showed a strong correlation between the age of a participant and their average score of the profile. Social media content that was informal, casual and personal tended to score higher across all metrics, compared to content that was less personal. From these results, it is possible to infer that factors such as age and the kind of content uploaded influence a person's short term parasocial interaction and the likelihood of a long term parasocial relationship with a political figure, but factors such as the social media they use and their news consumption habits do not.*

KEYWORDS –*Parasocial relationship, Social media, Political relationship*

I. INTRODUCTION

The anthropologist John L. Caughey used the term "imaginary relationship" to describe the relationship between media figures and their audiences.[1] In reference to American society, he argued that relationships with and knowledge of media figures were an essential part of establishing in–group identity. Discussions of television shows, sporting franchises, celebrities, and national political figures create a basis for socialisation even among strangers. Here, it is not only the knowledge of these personalities, but also having strong feelings for them, both negative and positive, that make them such an essential part of social life.[2] Caughey found that despite never having interacted with them face–to–face, individuals responded to and spoke of these personalities as though they were members of their primary group.[3]

To explain such relationships, Donald Horton and Richard Wohl coined the term "parasocial interaction"—the psychological experience of intimacy that develops over mediated encounters with performers over mass media.[4] This concept has been expanded to include interactions with a variety of media figures, including politicians. William Schneider referred to the period from the 1990s onwards as the "populist era", when political outcomes are determined by direct, personal relationships between political leaders and voters.[5] As digital media occupies greater and greater space in our social and political interactions, it becomes vital to consider the ways in which social media platforms are transforming not only our personal relationships, but also our political ones.

This paper seeks to understand the ways in which parasocial interactions have evolved with the advent of social media, particularly in the case of political actors. First, we trace the development of parasocial theory, with a focus on its application in the study of voter behaviour. We then examine how political figures use social media to craft distinct personae that facilitate the development of intimacy and parasocial connection. Finally, we measure variances in audience response to different kinds of social media content and gauge their impact on the overall impression of a political actor.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1956, Donald Horton and Richard Wohl put forth the concept of "parasocial interaction" to explain relationships that arose out of new mass media, particularly, television. These new media create such effective illusions of intimacy that the audience responded to a public figure the same way that they would to their peers.[6] Following this, a study of British television audiences found that the responses of the audience to soap opera characters were similar to the phenomena described by Horton and Wohl.[7] Karl E. Rosengren and Swen Windalh, in their study of mass media as an alternative to traditional relationships, argued that parasocial interaction took place because of "deficiencies" in social life, where mass media was used to compensate for

loneliness. They also made an important distinction between the concepts of "parasocial interaction" and "identification."[8] Jan–Erik Nordlund expanded this difference by introducing a third category— "capture"— where the viewer both interacts and identifies with the figure, integrating it into the larger concept of "media interactions."[9] Research on parasocial interaction was expanded to study the possibility of such interactions with soap opera characters[10] and comedians.[11]

Several researchers have also studied parasocial interaction in terms of its underlying psychological processes. R. B. Rubin and Michael McHugh, through their examination of parasocial relationships with television performers, found that "social attraction"—the idea that a media figure could be a friend—was more important in the development of a parasocial relationship than physical attraction.[12] In 1991, a landmark study by Joseph Conway and Alan M. Rubin found that parasocial interaction was such a significant motive in television viewing that it may be more important than the content of the program itself.[13] John Turner argued that homophily, particularly with regard to similarities in attitude, appearance and background, is an important factor in the formation of a parasocial relationship. From these studies, it can be suggested that there are several similarities between parasocial and social interaction.[14] Alan M. Rubin and Elizabeth Perse assert that parasocial interactions are a result of the human instinct to form attachments despite distance.[15] Similarly, Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass have argued that when parasocial interactions are examined from an evolutionary perspective, they can be considered an example of the "media equation," where social responses are elicited by the presence of human characteristics (such as hearing a person's voice or seeing their face).[16]

Parasocial theory is now an interdisciplinary field of study that seeks to explain the one–sided relationships that develop between audiences and distant media figures. Recent scholarship has focused on the effects of social media on parasocial interaction, and their larger implications on social relations, politics and culture.[17] Horton and Wohl described parasocial relationships as one–sided, non–dialectical, controlled by the performer, and unable to reach a stage of mutual development.[18] It is clear that such a definition needs to be re–examined in the context of social media. David Giles has argued that the interactivity of technological affordances facilitates a "quasi–parasocial" relationship that is not as one–sided as the earlier conception.[19]

Jonathan Cohen noted that the concept of the parasocial relationship is most suited to describing media figures who directly address the audience—television hosts, news readers and presenters.[20] However, recent research suggests that parasocial relationships can develop over any medium, including social media platforms.[21] It is in this context that it becomes important to examine how social media platforms shape interactions between political figures and their audiences, as well as offer new channels of political participation.

2.1 Measures of Parasocial Interaction

In 1979, Mark Levy constructed a 42–item psychometric scale to measure parasocial interaction on the basis of a study that collected data regarding the viewers' parasocial interactions with newscasters.[22] A similar, shorter scale was also developed by A.M. Rubin, Perse and Powell in 1985, referred to as the Parasocial Interaction (PSI) Scale.[23] The abridged 20–item scale was further shortened in 1987.[24] These scales measured variables such as perceived realism, attraction, television dependency and the amount of time spent watching television, which all correlated with the occurrence of parasocial interaction.[25]

An important exception to these findings is a 1997 study by Uli Gleich[26] carried out using a German sample. It is important to note that prior to this, most studies had used North American samples. Three main factors have been found to account for this variance in findings—items related to companionship, person–program interaction, and empathetic interaction—most likely reflecting the cultural differences between German and American audiences.[27] These differences also challenged the conception of parasocial interactions as unitary. More recently, Philip Auter and Philip Palmgreen developed the Audience–Persona Interaction (API) Scale which attempts to measure parasocial interaction across a range of multi–dimensional factors such as interaction, identification, interest, and problem–solving ability.[28]

Several scales have also been developed to measure various aspects of parasocial relationships, such as the Celebrity Appeal Questionnaire which was constructed by Gayle Stever in 1991[29] and the Celebrity Attitude Scale by Lynn McCutcheon, Rense Lange and James Houran (2002).[30] The PSI Process Scales were developed by Holger Schramm and Tilo Hartmann in 2008 and measured parasocial interaction as a whole, rather than its specific dimensions.[31] In 2011, Hartmann and Charlotte Goldhoorn designed the Experience of Parasocial Interaction (EPSI) Scale to measure the difference in parasocial interaction between a media figure who addresses the camera directly and one who does not.[32]

These scales have also been adapted in a variety of ways by researchers to measure parasocial interaction with political figures. Stephanie Dunn and Gwendelyn Nesbitt modified the PSI Scale to study parasocial interaction with political candidates over web pages and Facebook, as well as to measure differences in perceived intimacy between users' experiences of candidate webpages and their Facebook profiles.[33] In 2018, Jonathan Cohen and R. Lance Holbert modified the PSI Scale to devise the Political Parasocial Relationship

(PPSR) Scale.[34] Most recently, MA Hakim and James Liu have developed the Parasocial Relationship with Politicians (PSR–P) Scale. Unlike previous scales, the PSR–P focuses on measuring enduring feelings of intimacy with political figures.[35]

III. REFINING THEORETICAL CONCEPTS IN THE CONTEXT OF POLITICAL PARASOCIAL INTERACTION

While early scholarship used the terms "parasocial interaction" and "parasocial relationship" interchangeably, recent work has attempted to distinguish these concepts and define them more clearly.[36] Parasocial interaction has been differentiated from parasocial relationships as the audience's one–sided viewing experience of media, while a parasocial relationship is an on–going process having both affective and cognitive components that extend beyond the moment of media consumption.[37] With the introduction of this difference, it becomes necessary to note that not all parasocial interaction will result in the development of a parasocial relationship. A common feature between the two are their affective, cognitive and behavioural components, although these may vary in intensity.[38] Giles identifies three main characteristics that determine whether an instance of parasocial interaction can evolve beyond the initial encounter.[39]

3.1 Authenticity

Parasocial relationships are based on behaviours and actions that are observable through face–to–face interaction[40]—what we know of the people around us is not limited by what they tell us, but extends to our own inferences of their actions. In order to make such inferences, it is important for media figures to present a "credible persona."[41] Horton and Wohl argue that the reason that audience members are often interested in the personal lives of performers is that these details (their favourite food, their family, and their homes) help to deepen intimacy and overcome the constraints of the parasocial relationship. Since the relationship is an illusion, constant effort is required to sustain it.[42] The relationship is also maintained through interaction between the audience and media figures that are facilitated by social media—when they reply to comments, like photos or send messages the same way a friend would.

Horton and Wohl point out that parasocial relationships differ from traditional relationships in the way that the performer is static and unchanging, and his virtues are standardised according to a certain "formula" of performance. This is particularly seen with reference to fictional characters and creates a sense of comfort and familiarity because the performer behaves in a single linear manner every time.[43] Although personalities are not fictional on social media, the formulaic performance is intensified through instant feedback and responses decided on the basis of social media analytics. These allow for constant refinement of performance, tailoring them in a manner that will elicit a positive or numerically higher response from the target audience as well as attract new audiences.[44]

On social media, this feeling of authenticity may be deepened as it is perceived as an unmediated, unfiltered platform,[45] even though that might not be the case. Social media could be seen as more democratic in the way that more traditional media are not—not everyone gets to be on TV, but almost everyone can make an account on social media and use exactly the same features that these personalities do (creating a new post, holding live–streams or commenting on other celebrities' posts), leading to greater feelings of identification and relatability between the performers and the audience that would then translate to an increased perception of authenticity.

3.2 Representations across different media outlets

The parasocial relationship does not develop in a vacuum but is further reinforced by more "traditional media" (newspapers and televisions), as well as through more overtly mediated interactions such as those through public relations firms and executives.[46]

The familiarity cultivated on social media may also carry over to these traditional platforms, and therefore, the performer may seem more authentic as opposed to figures with whom the audience is unfamiliar. The appearance of political figures on various social media, doing tasks out of the realm of politics, could make them more relatable to the audience which has already seen them in political debates and discussions. The politician's power may also be further reaffirmed by the real–world impact of their performances in the media. One example of this is the impact of Donald Trump's tweets on the stock market during his presidency.[47]

3.3 User Contexts

The defining characteristic of a parasocial relationship is that the persona offers a "continuing relationship."[48]
On social media, this relationship exists, but is governed by different motives:
a) algorithms of these websites that reward those who post more[49]

b) the increasing competitiveness of the attention economy that requires even those who hold power outside of the world of media to constantly reaffirm their existence as relevant within the world of media, reminding users, "I exist and what I have to say is important!"

The association between audience and personality also begins to accumulate its own history and develop its own lexicon, partly through the continued performance of the media figure, but also through the sense of community formed among the members of the audience themselves.[50] On social media, this can manifest as fan pages and fan forums that further intensify the relationship between the figure and the audience by linking people with similar interests so that the figure acts as a mutual friend. Thus, parasocial interaction can be transformed from a solitary activity to a community one.

Horton and Wohl argue that the audience does not play a passive role. The performance ends only when the performer's argument has been analysed by the audience and either accepted or rejected. This is not an individual process but rather one that occurs through discussions with other spectators. It is thus important for the performer to balance the specificity required for intimacy with the level of specificity that would alienate audience members.[51] For example, the audience members who are unable to follow the argument due to a lack of prior knowledge. In the case of political figures, this is mainly by avoiding the alienation of their primary political base while continuing to attract new members.

Identification has also been found to be an essential part of the parasocial experience, acting as a necessary catalyst in the development of a parasocial relationship.[52] There are two types of identification that can be seen within the parasocial relationship— personal identification, where the audience member sees themselves as sharing similar qualities with the figure, and wishful identification, where the audience member aspires to be like the figure[53] Scholars such as Jonathan Cohen have also argued that identification is a separate construct, where instead of wanting to interact with the media figure, the audience member wishes to *be* the media figure. It is therefore possible for an audience member to experience parasocial interaction, a parasocial relationship, and identification with the same media figure.[54]

Horton and Wohl make note of the typical relationship shared between the audience and the performer, where the audience is "expected to benefit by his wisdom, reflect on his advice, sympathize with him in his difficulties, forgive his mistakes, buy the products that he recommends, and keep his sponsor informed of the esteem in which he is held."[55] In the era of social media, this phenomenon seems to have only further entrenched itself. A dedicated audience member, i.e., a true fan will only respond to a performer in the way that is expected of them. If they do not, they may either experience a break–up of the parasocial relationship,[56] which has serious psychological consequences, or may find themselves excluded from communities that have coalesced around a particular media figure.

IV. THE ROLE OF PARASOCIAL INTERACTION IN THE FORMATION OF POLITICAL RELATIONSHIPS

Initially, the theory of a parasocial relationship was only confined to those Horton and Wohl considered "media performers," for whom they coined the term "personae"—talk show hosts, interviewers, quiz masters—figures who held relevance only in the realm of media, in contrast to typical celebrities, such as actors or musicians who existed outside the realm of their work. Newer media personalities who existed in the then–novel world of "show business" were only a function of the media in which they appeared. [57] Horton and Wohl note:

"They may move out into positions of leadership in the world at large as they become famous and influential. Frank Sinatra, for example, has become known as a 'youth leader.' Conversely, figures from the political world, to choose another example, may become media 'personalities' when they appear regularly. Fiorello LaGuardia, the late Mayor of New York, is one such case."[58]

On social media platforms, it is necessary, and almost compulsory for politicians and other political figures to have at least one, if not multiple, social media accounts, spread across a variety of platforms. Each of these accounts cater to a certain demographic of users and posts vary from platform to platform to best appeal to the target audience.[59]

As Giles's conception of "quasi–parasocial" interaction suggests, social media websites such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter and Facebook all have various feedback mechanisms—comments, likes, question and answer functions where users can directly converse with their followers, along with the ability to live stream and invite followers "on stage." These are just a few examples of the many ways social media platforms enable audiences to perceive their relationship with media personalities as one between peers or equals, where their opinions and feedback alter the behaviour of and decisions made by these figures. Twitch, the streaming website takes this relationship further—live streamers broadcast their entire day online, allowing their audience to control what they do throughout the day (what they wear, what they eat, where they go) through audience polls. This new form of interaction is now increasingly being adopted by more traditional media figures.[60]

Candidate–voter interactions are a potentially decisive factor in a successful political campaign.[61] Social media is now a prime platform for such interactions, with its increased interactivity and ability to create feelings of intimacy between users. In such a situation, it is the personal characteristics of political figures that become vital factors in deciding the preferences of voters. New mass media, particularly social media platforms, allow political figures to communicate more intimately, making them "personalizing vehicles" that expose audiences to their image constantly.[62]

Researchers Shira Gabriel, Elaine Paravati, Melanie C. Green, and Jason Flomsbee have argued that parasocial connection can be seen as a crucial factor in Donald Trump's election.[63] They focus their research on his previous appearances as a television personality on shows such as *The Apprentice* and *Celebrity Apprentice*, where he judged contestants on the basis of various business–related challenges[64] and assert that since these shows predate his entry into politics, the allowed for the development of a positive parasocial connection that could cut across party lines.[65] Moreover, as Kevin Drum notes, the content of these shows portrayed Trump in a specific way:

"He is running things. He sets the tasks. The competitors all call him "Mr. Trump" and treat him obsequiously. He gives orders and famous people accept them without quibble. At the end of the show, he asks tough questions and demands accountability. He is smooth and unruffled while the team members are tense and tongue–tied. Finally, having given everything the five minutes of due diligence it needs, he takes charge and fires someone. And on the season finale, he picks a big winner and, in the process, raises lots of money for charity. Do you see how precisely this squares with so many people's view of the presidency?"[66]

Similar parallels can be drawn with the political careers of wrestler Jesse Ventura and movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger.[67] Though they were not depicted in the media in such overtly "presidential roles", one could go as far as to say that the traits of the characters they portrayed—invincibility, power, strength, and calmness in the face of danger—continues to be associated with their political identities.

It is important to note that parasocial relationships also vary across different political systems. Hakim and Liu have argued that there is a higher incidence and intensity of parasocial attachments among politicians in a presidential system as compared to those in a parliamentary system. Similar differences can also be noted across mature and emerging democracies, where less established democracies were found to have political parasocial relationships of a higher intensity.[68]

Social media platforms, with the agency they afford to users in crafting their own images, give political figures opportunities to create parasocial connections. There may be significant differences with television— the difficulty in creating a "storyline," and more intense competition for capturing the attention of an audience— that dilute the intensity of the parasocial relationship. But ultimately, social media allows political figures to be in control of their own image, building parasocial relationships anyway they desire. They allow them to address and interact with their audience in a way that traditional media does not.

Horton and Wohl outline various strategies used by media personae to create an illusion of intimacy[69]—they imitate the conversational style of an informal face to face gathering and "keep it real" by sharing everything from mundane routines of their day to day lives to personal milestones. Another strategy to blur the lines of the performance is to interact with other public figures on these platforms. Today, media personae tag each other, comment on each other's posts and tweet to each other in such a way that the audience feels privy to the relationship between them. A third strategy employed by public figures is to blend in with the audience itself. Previously, TV show hosts would leave the stage and interact directly with the audience. On social media, political actors engage with their audience through comment replies, social media takeovers and inviting them on live streams. The aim is to reduce the distance between the audience and the media figure. Finally, Horton and Wohl highlight how the technical devices of the media themselves are used to create this illusion of intimacy.[70] On social media, this illusion exists by its very nature—there is always a possibility that the media personality may see and like your comment, like your photo or reply to your message, even if this is a rare occurrence. Without this illusion of intimacy, the parasocial relationship would not exist. Its one–sided nature precludes any real development and necessitates the continued use of these illusions in order to maintain this relationship.

It is the behavioural component of parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships that make them so significant to political relations. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), developed by Richard E Petty and John Cacioppo, seeks to explain differences in the processing of stimuli and their relationship with attitude change. They define elaboration, an essential part of attitude change, as the number of thoughts generated by an individual in relation to a particular message.[71] When an individual is presented with any information, they process it in one of two ways—centrally, which involves careful consideration of the merits of an argument, and peripherally, which is the acceptance of an argument without any scrutiny.[72] Petty and Cacioppo referred to these as the "routes to persuasion" and argued that centrally processed information is more likely to result in enduring attitude change.[73] Parasocial relationships are predicated on greater intimacy and involvement, leading to greater elaboration, and therefore, a greater likelihood of successful attitude change.[74] An example of the

effectiveness of parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships in behavioural change can be seen in a series of studies conducted in India on entertainment and education programs that were successful in changing viewers' attitudes on a variety of issues—substance abuse, dowry, small family size, sexual health and women's rights.[75]

Thus, the importance of parasocial relationships to political behaviour has been firmly established. However, the question of how best political actors can cultivate and encourage such relationships remains. This study seeks to examine whether, barring personality factors, particular kinds and styles of content have an effect on the intensity of parasocial connections established with political figures.

V. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

5.1 Method

Participants for the online survey were found through random selection. They were first asked to provide details of their social media usage and news consumption. They were then presented with 8 images and captions from the Instagram feed of "A". They were told that A is a fictitious politician whose political stances aligned with their own. Participants were expected to answer questions as though they were actually viewing A's Instagram profile. Each image was followed by a set of statements, and participants had to rate each statement on a 5–point Likert scale depending on how much they agreed (5) or disagreed (1) with it.

Since our study aims to define the specific kind of content on social media that elicits a parasocial interaction, we chose to construct a profile of a politician to avoid the bias of participants' political beliefs. A was represented by a male in his early 20s. The captions and images were based on actual profiles of politicians who vary in their age, gender, popularity level, political party and nationality. The images were divided into two categories—one set consisted of more "traditional" political content with little to no personal information and opinions (hereafter referred to as "traditional content"), the other set was more personal and included information about A's day–to–day life and personal relations (hereafter referred to as "personal content").

5.2 Sample

We asked participants to provide the following descriptive information:
1. Age
2. Social media usage
3. Platforms of news consumption

We collected a total of 250 responses. Participants ranged from 18 to 78 years of age with the average of the sample being 38. The majority of participants were between the ages of 20 to 30 (44 percent; n=110). 98.4 percent (n=246) of the respondents were found to be using WhatsApp, 39.6 percent (n=99) use Facebook, 51.2 percent (n=128) use Instagram, and 14.4 percent (n=36) use Twitter. Participants were also asked to report their news consumption habits. 60.8 percent (n=152) consumed news through social media platforms, 48.8 percent (n=122) through newspapers and magazines (online and physical editions), 30.4 percent (n=76) through television news channels, and 10.8 percent (n=27) through YouTube videos.

5.3 Questionnaire

Respondents were required to answer a 47–point questionnaire consisting of 6 questions after each image and a final question that dealt with their overall opinion of A. Questions assessed respondents' opinions of and feelings toward A after each image on the basis of multiple dimensions of parasocial interaction, including—perceptions of intimacy, social attraction, relatability, trustworthiness and desire for sustained interaction.

5.4 Findings

The following observations were made using the Python Library Pandas and Scikit learn. The results of the study were analysed and the following inferences were drawn from them:

RQ 1: How does age relate to a respondent's opinion of A?

1.1) Upon using Scikit Learn, the following correlation between the average of all responses of each respondent and their ages was observed: using regression, the R^2 score was found to be 0.388. The variables also have a p–value of 0.0017 indicating that the null hypothesis (that there is no relationship between the variables) is incorrect.
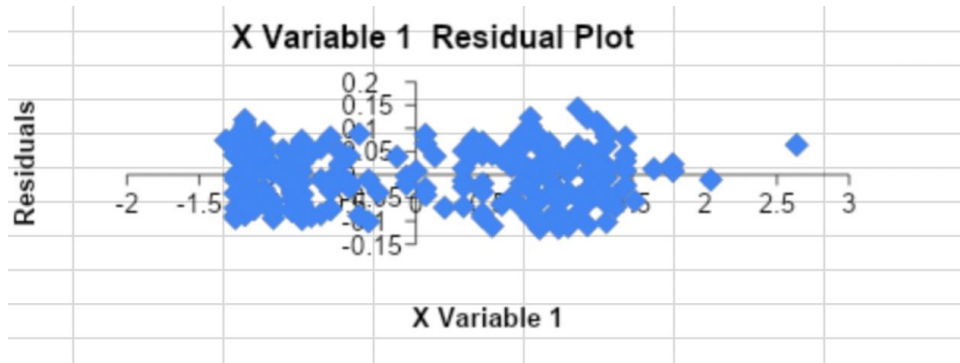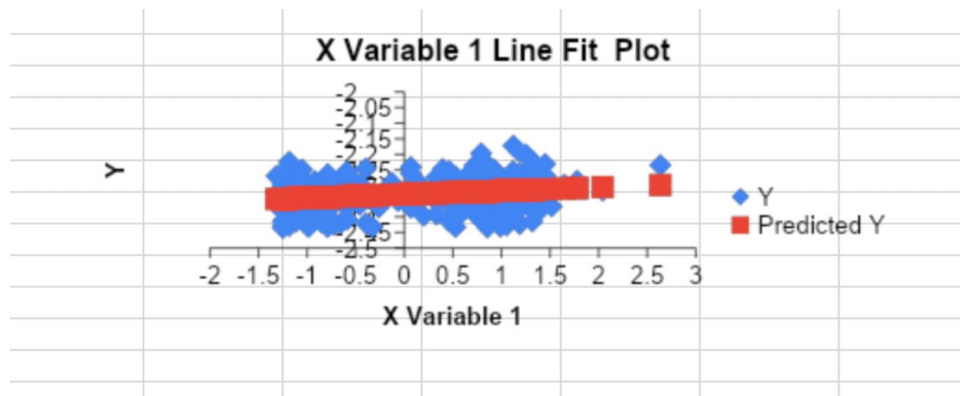
Graph 1

Residuals of the variable are randomly scattered around the residual = 0, indicating that this linear model is accurate
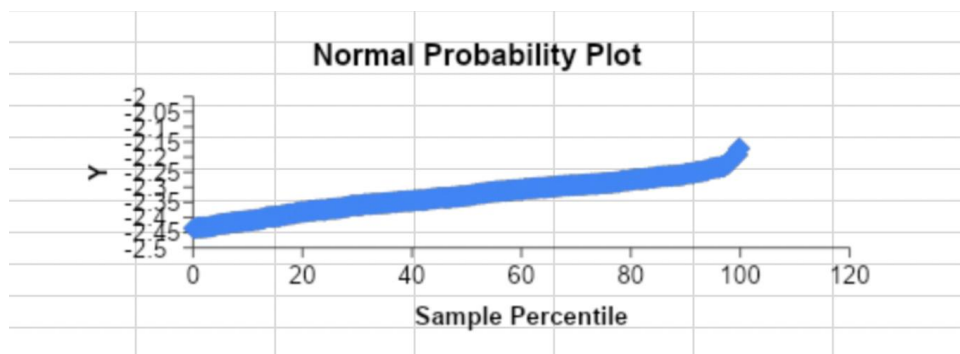
Graph 2

The line plot above shows a constant increase in the average score paired with an increase in average age

Graph 3

A comparison between the predicted and actual fit of the variables

1.2) The following is a table of the average scores for each age group across both traditional and personal content.

| Age	Average Score of Traditional Content	Average Score of Personal Content	Overall Average Score
20–30	2.2	2.6	2.4
31–40	2.3	2.6	2.5
41–50	2.6	2.9	2.8
51–60	2.5	2.9	2.7
61–70	2.9	3.3	3.1
All Ages	**2.4**	**2.8**	**2.6**

Table 1

Average scores across all age groups

RQ 2: How do sources of news consumption affect a respondent's opinion of A?

A majority of the 250 respondents obtained their news from multiple sources, creating 15 different combinations (visible in Graph 4). Out of those combinations, the most used source was social media (152 users), followed by newspapers and magazines (122), television news programs (78) and YouTube (28).

Sources of news	Number of Users	Average Age of Users	Percentage of Users	Average Score
Social media	152	33.9	60.8%	2.6
Newspapers, magazines	122	41.2	48.8%	2.6
Television news programs	76	43.9	30.4%	2.8
YouTube	28	33	10.8%	3

Table 2
Respondents' news consumption habits

News Sources VD
Andrew Pavamani and Shilpa Mariam Joseph | September 8, 2021
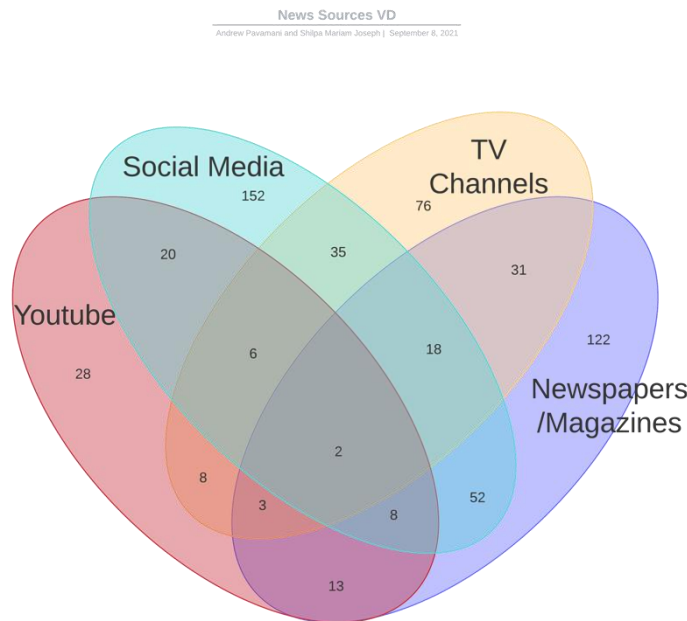
Graph 4
Cross–sections between the sources of news used by participants. The figures here represent the number of people in these sections.

RQ 3: How does social media usage affect a respondent's view of A?
A majority of the 250 respondents used 15 unique combinations of different social media apps (visible in Graph 5). Out of those combinations, the most used source was WhatsApp (246 users), followed by Facebook (99), Instagram (128) and Twitter (36).

Social Media Platform	Number of Users	Average Age of Users	Percentage of Users	Average Score
WhatsApp	246	38.2	98.4%	2.6
Facebook	99	43.3	39.6%	2.6
Instagram	128	31.1	51.2%	2.6
Twitter	36	39.2	14.4%	2.8
Miscellaneous (Snapchat, Reddit, TikTok, LinkedIn)	9	26.7	3.6%	2.7

Table 2
Respondents' social media usage habits
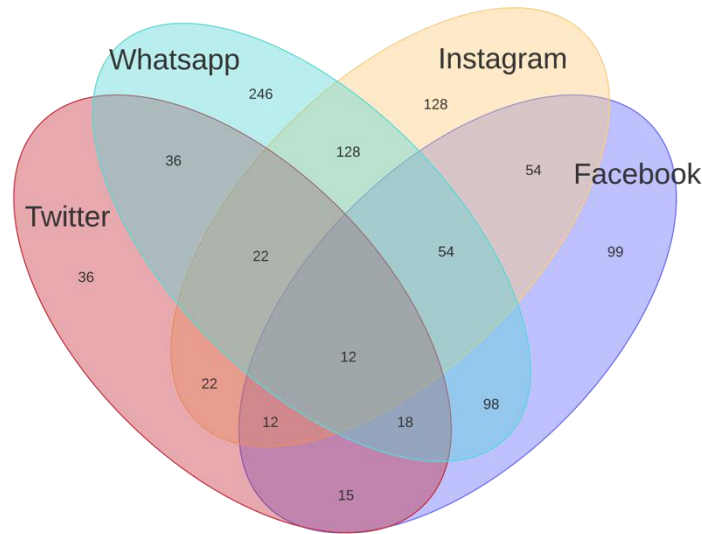
Graph 5

The Venn diagram represents the cross–sections between the social media platforms used by participants. The figures here represent the number of people in these sections.

RQ 4: Do all respondents with a positive view of A want to engage in a parasocial relationship?

Scores have been divided into the following categories: greater than or equal to 4, indicating a positive response; less than 4 and greater than or equal to 3, indicating a neutral response; and less than 3, indicating a negative response. We calculated the average of each respondent's response to questions 1–4 (which measure various aspects of parasocial interaction) for each image, and the average of all their responses to questions 5 and 6 (which measure the potential for the development of a parasocial relationship).

Question 1–4		
Scores	**Average Age**	**Number of people**
≥ 4	50.8	13
≥ 3	40.05	84
< 3	35.4	153

Table 4

Average scores and ages of respondents for Question 1–4

Question 5, 6		
Scores	**Average Age**	**Number of people**
≥ 4	50.5	11
≥ 3	40.3	69
< 3	36.2	170

Table 5

Average scores and ages of respondents for Question 5 and 6

Overall Opinion		
Scores	**Average Age**	**Number of people**
≥ 4	46.04	25
≥ 3	37.3	203
< 3	35.04	22

Table 6

Average scores and ages of respondents for Question 7

RQ 5: Does the depiction of relationships enhance feelings of intimacy on social media?

Horton and Wohl note that the performer constantly attempts to blur the line between the studio and the audience; to do so, the presenter and his fellow cast members behave in an intimate manner. This not only allows the audience member to understand what the performer and their "friends" are like, but also reaches a point where the audience member begins considering themselves as a "part of this fellowship, by extension."[76] A was pictured alone in images 1, 2 and 7 (traditional content), and images 3, 4 and 8 (personal content). In images 5 (traditional) and 6 (personal), A was depicted with others—a businessman and his pet dog respectively.

Image	Type	Average Interaction Score	Long–Term Interaction Score
1	Traditional	2.1	1.8
2	Traditional	2.5	2.2
3	Personal	2.5	2.2
4	Personal	2.7	2.5
5	Traditional	2.4	2.2
6	Personal	3.1	2.8
7	Traditional	2.5	2.3
8	Personal	2.8	2.5

Table 7
Classification of the different images and their long–term and average interaction scores

VI.   DISCUSSION

RQ 1.1) As noted earlier, the R^2 score of 0.388 indicates a strong correlation between the age of a participant and their average score of A. Furthermore, statistical analysis of the null hypothesis returns a p–value of 0.0017, confirming the strength of this correlation. It is interesting to note that as age increases, so does the average score given to A in nearly every criterion, suggesting that individuals over the age of 41 are more likely to have positive parasocial interactions with political figures and form long lasting parasocial relationships.

RQ 1.2) From table 1, we can observe that personal content scores a higher average in every age range. Every succeeding age group outscores each other, apart from those in the 51–60 range. Yet again, this suggests that individuals over the age of 41 are more likely to experience positive parasocial interaction with political figures than those younger to them

RQ 2) Respondents who consumed news through social media platforms and through conventional news sources like newspapers and magazines gave A an average score of 2.6. Those who consumed news through television news channels, another conventional outlet for news, averaged a score of 2.8. Those who used YouTube, which now displays elements of a neo–news platform with independent channels hosting their own shows, averaged a score of 3. These categories are not independent of each other, and most users consume news through more than one source. These variables have a low correlation as they return a p–value of 0.983, thus, news sources did not affect the average scores of respondents. However, respondents who consume news through sources that have the most interaction—YouTube and television news channels—where news presenters address the audience directly, still score the highest.

RQ 3) When it comes to social media usage, there doesn't seem to be much disparity among average scores, which range from 2.6–2.8. The effect of age also seems to be neutralised. However, Twitter, with the second highest average age of users, also has the highest average score. These variables have a p–value of 0.107, thus, social media use does not affect the average scores of respondents.

RQ 4) Upon examining the data, it is apparent that there is a significant difference in the number of respondents who scored above 3 in questions 1–4 and in the overall opinion of A, and those who indicated an interest in developing a parasocial relationship. The largest drop off is in the youngest age group, suggesting that that they are less likely to form parasocial relationships with political figures, require greater interaction with a figure, or require different kinds of content to form a parasocial connection

RQ 5) The average score of traditional photos where A was alone was 2.4, as compared to image 5 which was 2.5. The average score of personal photos with A alone was found to be 2.7, compared to with image 6 which was 3.1 The image that obtained the highest average score across all metrics (with an average interaction of 3.1 and a long–term interaction of 2.8) was A and their dog, suggesting that relatable companions, such as pets, heavily sway the opinion of the audience. However, the traditional image with a character (image 5) does not have the highest score among other traditional images. Thus, the strategy of depicting personal interactions and relationships is only effective in the case of personal content.

6.1 Limitations

Our survey faced the following limitations:

1) The use of a fictitious political figure does not let us account for variables like a respondent's political preference, which would surely influence the way a respondent interacts with a political figure online.

2) The opportunity to cultivate a "continuous relationship" is necessary to develop a parasocial relationship.[77] Given that A is a fictitious figure, respondents could not develop a parasocial relationship through long–term exposure. Credibility is also an important factor in the formation of a parasocial relationship.[78] Irrespective of social media content, the strength of a parasocial relationship is closely linked to the perceived credibility of the political figure. Therefore, a participant's response can be taken not as direct measurements of a parasocial relationship but as the potential to develop one.

3) As the questionnaire was 47–items long, participants may have been affected by respondent fatigue, which could potentially impact the accuracy of their responses.

VII. CONCLUSION

Writing this paper amid the COVID–19 pandemic has been to watch the power of parasocial relationships in action. Public trust in the government is faltering to all–time lows, and politicians find themselves relying on public figures to promote vaccinations.[79] In the absence of institutions they can trust, citizens may turn towards individuals, and it is in this context that the study of parasocial relations acquires an even greater significance. As social media becomes further entrenched in our lives and in our politics, understanding how parasocial relationships are both utilised and exploited is vital to understanding the course of democracy in the 21st century.

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