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# The Relationship between self-reported strength of parasocial interaction and perception of world stability

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Department of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

The Relationship Between Self-Reported Strength of Parasocial Interaction and Perception of

World Stability

by

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in partial fulfillment of the Master of Science degree

in Communication & Media Technologies

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-REPORTED STRENGTH OF PARASOCIAL
INTERACTION AND PERCEPTION OF WORLD STABILITY

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## Abstract

This study investigates parasocial relationships, uncertainty, and need for orientation.

Respondents' strength of parasocial relationship was gathered using an adapted version of Auter

and Palmgreen's (2000) Audience-Persona Interaction Scale. Respondents' perception of world

stability was comprised of level of uncertainty and need for orientation, both measured using a

scale created for the present study. Results showed a positive correlation between respondents'

strength of parasocial relationship and level of uncertainty and a significant difference between

respondents with high and low levels of parasocial interaction and need for orientation.

However, no significant differences were found to exist between respondents with high and low

levels of parasocial interaction, high and low levels of interpersonal interaction, and need for

orientation.

        Keywords: parasocial, need for orientation, level of uncertainty, Uncertainty Reduction

Theory, media figures

The Relationship Between Self-Reported Strength of Parasocial Interaction and Perception of

World Stability

Horton and Wohl (1956) first described the "parasocial relationship" as when people

encounter and interact with media figures as if the media personalities were actual social and

personal acquaintances of theirs.  Today not only do media bombard us with messages about

media figures, we also bombard each other with our own opinions, likes, and dislikes about these

media personalities who most of us don't know personally. This may seem a strange

phenomenon, but the seemingly endless availability of content featuring media personalities at

our disposal can facilitate, for some, the "relationships" they have with various media figures.

However, Horton and Wohl's report of the parasocial phenomenon occurred long before

the digital age and shortly before television became broadly popular. The original study was

restricted to radio and television and focused on a specific type of media figure described as a

"performer," which referred to "quizmasters, announcers, and interviewers" (Horton & Wohl,

1956, pg. 216). Horton and Wohl stated that audience members felt an extreme closeness with

the performer and that the performer became a pervasive presence in the audience member's

non-mediated life. The performer's on-air presence provided a continuing relationship that

allowed intimate parasocial relationships to develop and intensify.

In the digital age, the concept of media figures has changed significantly. A plethora of

information about celebrities' personal lives is instantaneously available with a simple click.

Interactive fan sites abound and there is an entire genre of celebrity "reality" TV dedicated to

allowing voyeuristic viewers' glimpses inside the lives of their favorite celebrities. Blogs such as

Perez Hilton's and television shows like E! News chronicle happenings in celebrity news and in celebrities' "off screen" lives.

The parasocial phenomenon does not only apply to media figures that actually exist. Intense parasocial relationships with fictional characters portrayed by actors in media are also possible, as Perse and Rubin found in a study that measured viewers' parasocial relations with soap opera characters (1989). Also, as user-generated content becomes increasingly easy to create, parasocial relationships with fictional characters aren't confined to the original mediated contexts in which those characters are presented. Fan fiction websites allow people to create their own story lines for television shows, movies, and books, increasing and intensifying fans' opportunity for parasocial interaction with fictional characters.

While it may be easy to assume that only people who lack sufficient social and interpersonal skills and contacts form parasocial relationships as a means of compensation, previous research has shown that this is not the case (Canary & Spitzberg, 1993; Tsao, 1996). Parasocial relationships with media figures serve a number of different functions for different individuals (Caughey 1994), and parasocial relationships develop in much the same way as face-to-face social and interpersonal relationships (Auter & Davis, 1991).

These more contemporary studies (Canary & Spitzberg, 1993; Tsao, 1996; Caughey, 1994; Auter & Davis, 1991) provide support for some of the original ideas articulated by Horton and Wohl in 1956: media figures are an intense presence in peoples' daily lives and that viewers can count on media figures to be there so much so that media figures become a routine part of viewers' lives.

Currently, however, these original tenets of the parasocial phenomenon have the potential to take on a new significance due to the perceived unpredictability about the present state of the world. Terrorism, war, the global recession, and even the all-time high divorce rate, are all factors that contribute to the perceived instability in peoples' everyday lives. According to a January 2010 study released by the Pew Research Center, the public's top three concerns for 2010 are: the economy, jobs, and terrorism; each of which was named by at least 80 percent of those surveyed by Pew as a "top priority" for 2010.

Uncertainty reduction theory is an interpersonal communication theory stating that people seek information about others in order to be able to predict others' behavior, and therefore reduce and resolve uncertainty about other people (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).  However, on a macro level, events such as terrorism, war, recession, and divorce all prompt uncertainty in people about the world around them, which people then seek to resolve.

As our world becomes more unpredictable and seems less stable, while opportunities to encounter media figures increase both in quantity and means, the adoption of parasocial relationships has the potential to become a source of predictability and stability. While an individual may not be able to predict whether they will keep their job from week-to-week, when or where the next terrorist attack will occur, or if their marriage will end in divorce, they can be certain that media figures will be there. This ability to predict and control parasocial interaction may serve to reduce tension and anxiety about other external uncontrollable and unpredictable events.

**Research Questions**

The guiding research questions in this study will be

*RQ 1*:  What is the relationship between self-reported strength of parasocial relationships and the level of uncertainty about the perceived state of the world?

*RQ 2*: What is the difference between high self-reported strength of parasocial relationships and low self-reported strength of parasocial relationships and the overall level of self-reported need for orientation?

*RQ 3*:  What differences are there by self-reported strength of interpersonal interaction, self-reported strength of parasocial relationship and overall level of self-reported need for orientation?

## Rationale

While the idea of parasocial relationships was first formally introduced in the 1950s, and has been explored in various scholarly disciplines since then, it takes on a new significance in the current digital age.  Not only has celebrity media coverage increased exponentially in a short time, but the concurrent exponential growth and progress in technology has also allowed for this coverage to be delivered through multiple channels (Tapper & Morris, 2005). Technology has also allowed unprecedented accessibility to celebrities' real lives, only fueling the public's seemingly insatiable appetite for celebrity news.

At the same time, and also due to technology, parasocial relationships with fictional characters are also provided new environments in which to flourish like never before. Fan websites, blogs, and social networking site groups provide viewers and fans with unlimited ways to express their feelings toward and identify with certain fictional characters, strengthening and deepening relationships with nonexistent characters beyond just the length of a given television show, movie, book, etc.

There is also the emerging trend of fan fiction. Fan fiction allows people to bring their parasocial relationships online, rewriting storylines that differ from what happened in the original source. Fans' relationships with fictional characters can literally be whatever that fan wishes regardless of the character's mass media portrayal (Powers, 2000).

The unprecedented access to and coverage of celebrities coupled with the technological advancements that allow people to interact with both real celebrities and fictional characters in new and limitless ways make for a combination that has the potential to significantly change the nature of parasocial relationships and the functions these parasocial relationships serve media consumers.

## Literature Review

Horton and Wohl's 1956 groundbreaking study introduced the phenomenon of parasocial interaction and laid the foundation for most all of the subsequent research. Interestingly, although the Horton and Wohl study was published in the journal *Psychiatry*, most of the research that followed on the phenomenon of parasocial relationships was published in the communication and media studies fields.

Research on parasocial relationships developed and improved upon a scale to measure parasocial interaction and relationships, and measured motivations to form parasocial relationships, functions of parasocial relationships, and dissolutions of parasocial relationships, or parasocial "break ups."

Horton and Wohl defined the phenomenon as when people encounter media figures, or "personae," (p. 215) as if they were their actual social and personal acquaintances. In their study the term "intimacy at a distance" was used to describe parasocial relationships, meaning that

these relationships are entirely one-sided as a person does not really know the media figure, but yet still feels an extremely intense connection to that media figure: "To say that he (the media figure) is familiar and intimate is to use pale and feeble language for the pervasiveness and closeness with which multitudes feel his presence" (p. 216). Also central to the concept of parasocial relationships was the idea that the media figure was a source of reliability and dependability: viewers and listeners could count on that media figure to be there and "integrated into the routines of daily life" (p. 216).

Similar to social relationships, over time parasocial relationships develop a shared history that gives meaning to the relationship and creates a sense of intimacy for the viewer. Horton and Wohl also discussed the different types of parasocial relationships: friend, teacher, comforter, and model among others. Subsequent research following Horton and Wohl's introduction of the parasocial phenomenon focused on the different ways to measure parasocial interaction, parasocial formation and functions, and the parasocial break-up.

**Measuring Parasocial Interaction and Relationships**

Rosengren and Windahl (1972) made the first attempt to measure parasocial interaction, but were dissatisfied with their results, which were gathered from respondents' self-categorization of "degree of involvement." After refining this original study, Rosengren, Windahl, Hakansson, and Johnsson-Smaragdi (1976), produced another measure of parasocial interaction. This research concluded that there was a weak correlation between the parasocial interaction measure and television viewing levels.

Nordlund (1978) created a set of six indices of media interaction designed to measure respondents' parasocial relationships with characters in magazine series, television series, game

show hosts, entertainment shows, as well as interaction with characters from series programming and game show hosts. However, the development, testing, and results of this scale system were not reported. Nordlund concluded that like social relationships, parasocial relationships develop over time and are more intense when they mimic interpersonal interaction.

Levy (1979) created a four-item parasocial interaction survey also based on qualitative date, which was improved upon by Houlberg (1984), who developed a five-item measure of parasocial interaction, but found no correlation between that measurement and television viewing levels (Houlberg, 1984). Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) developed another measure of parasocial interaction: a 10-item scale measuring viewers' self-reported identification with their favorite television character.

Identifying weaknesses with previous research, Auter and Palmgreen (2000) developed the most current measure of parasocial interaction, the Audience-Persona Interaction Scale (API), a multi-dimensional measure of parasocial interaction. The API model is comprised of 22 items and four sub-scales: identification with favorite character, interest in favorite character, group identification/interaction, and favorite character's problem solving ability. Slight relationships were found between parasocial interaction and viewing level.

**Parasocial Interaction and Relationships: Formation and Functions**

Other research on parasocial relationships has focused on why viewers form these relationships and the functions that they serve. Some studies suggest that parasocial relationships act to complement social relationships. Rubin and McHugh (1987) applied the interpersonal communication theory of uncertainty reduction to the formation of parasocial relationships. Results found that parasocial relationships followed a path from "social and task attraction to

parasocial interaction to a sense of relationship importance" (p. 279), similar to the path of

development for interpersonal relationships. This study has confirmed the importance of social

attraction to the development of parasocial relationships (Rubin & McHugh 1987).

Similarly, Perse and Rubin (1989) surveyed soap opera viewing college students and

found that parasocial relationships with soap opera characters were similar to interpersonal

relationships in that parasocial relationships were based on uncertainty reduction and the ability

for the viewer to accurately predict the feelings and behaviors of their favorite persona (Perse &

Rubin, 1989). Viewers extended their interpersonal relationship skills in forming parasocial

relationships, and used similar language when describing both interpersonal and parasocial

relationships (Perse & Rubin, 1989).

Tsao (1996) examined the formation of parasocial relationships in the context of two

opposing paradigms. The Deficiency paradigm predicts that individuals most likely to participate

in high television consumption and parasocial interaction are motivated by some sort of deficit in

their social and interpersonal relationships caused by certain personality traits (empathy,

extraversion, and neuroticism), and high television consumption and parasocial interaction are a

means of compensation. Alternately, the Global-Use paradigm suggests that media use behavior

does not need to be motivated by compensation, and is based on three premises: (1) parasocial

relationships result from a more "general process of emotional bonding with a persona than from

compensation seeking" (p. 91), (2) parasocial relationships are based on a similar set of

expectancies as interpersonal and social relationships, and (3) parasocial relationships involve

the media and interpersonal interaction as complementary in satisfying a person's interaction

needs.

Tsao found that individuals with lower empathy, lower extraversion, and higher neuroticism watched more television than individuals with higher empathy, higher extraversion, and lower neuroticism. However, though these individuals watched more television, they exhibited no stronger, and sometimes an even weaker, tendency toward parasocial interaction. The study concluded that the Deficiency paradigm applied to sheer volume of television viewing, but the Global-Use paradigm applied when parasocial interaction was involved (Tsao, 1996). Results also suggest that, based on the underlying premises of the Global-Use paradigm, parasocial relationships act to complement interpersonal and social relationships.

Auter and Davis (1991) touch on an important aspect of parasocial relationships as put forth in the original Horton and Wohl study, the idea of "breaking the fourth wall" in television viewing. This idea also serves to further the notion that parasocial relationships function in similar ways as interpersonal relationships. "Breaking the fourth wall" refers to when characters in television shows speak directly to audience members. Characters on the shows that break the fourth wall acknowledge viewers in multiple ways; they talk directly to audience members as well as through facial expressions and gestures. Auter and Davis found that audience members liked to be involved in the programming in this manner that creates the illusion of interpersonal interaction.

Canary and Spitzberg (1993) offered support for the idea that parasocial relationships complement rather compensate for interpersonal and social relationships. Their study found that chronically lonely people derive fewer media gratifications than do situationally lonely and nonlonely people.

Other related research on parasocial relationships focuses on why people form the relationships with the media figures, or personae, that they do. Turner (1993) suggests that attitude homophily is the strongest predictor of the parasocial relationship, with a lesser correlation between appearance homophily and background homophily. Turner's study supported Rubin and McHugh's (1987) finding that viewers are more likely to form parasocial relationships with those persona to which they are socially attracted. The more that the persona's perceived attitudes coincide with a viewer's, the stronger the parasocial relationship between that persona and that viewer. However, the length of time spent viewing a particular persona was not an indication of the strength of the parasocial relationship.

Since attitude homophily is a strong predictor of parasocial interaction, other research has attempted to apply this finding to specific viewer attitudes. Eyal and Rubin (2003) attempted to find a link between viewers with aggressive personality traits and their parasocial relationships with aggressive media persona. By measuring respondents' trait aggression and relationships with television characters, which were content analyzed to determine aggression levels, the study concluded that while viewer aggression predicted identification with aggressive characters, it did not predict parasocial interaction.

Much research does, however, indicate that parasocial relationships provide a model for self and building identity. Parasocial relationship formation begins in childhood (Hoffner, 1996). Interviews with children aged 7-12 about their favorite television character revealed that for male characters, parasocial interaction was predicted by perceived intelligence, humor, and (for boys only) strength. For female characters, which were only chosen by girls, parasocial interaction

was predicted only by perceived attractiveness (Hoffner, 1996). The favorite chosen characters were regarded as both friends and role models.

Caughey (1994) provided an in depth look at how these parasocial relationships continue through adulthood and the functions they serve in people's lives. Caughey conducted a very thorough interview with one respondent, Gina, and her imaginary social relationship with Steven Segal. The findings suggest that the persona with which the viewer forms a parasocial relationship provides a model for self, and a subject of identification and admiration. The individual can bring the qualities of the persona in to their own personalities and in dealing with real world situations; for example, a viewer thinking about what a certain persona would do in a real life situation that viewer may be facing, resulting in that viewer acting in the way that they perceive the persona may act. The persona can also act as an ideal for the viewer, filling in the missing aspects, or what the viewers perceive as his or her missing aspects, in their own personalities and lives. For Gina, not only was Steven Segal a role model and friend, he also filled the place of a strong, reliable man that was missing from her life (Caughey, 1994).

Caughey also commented on the appearance of celebrities with whom viewers form parasocial relationships in those viewers' dreams and daydreams, and Alperstein (2003) further explores this phenomenon. Scenes and situations encountered in the dream world tend to reflect the waking experience of the dreamer. This should not be surprising as Caughey (1984) found that "The dream world, like the world of media, is an imaginary world" (p. 90). Alperstein (2003) found that members of the dreamer's family made up a high percentage of dream characters because the dreamer is emotionally involved with family members. Similarly, in contemporary society, emotional involvement extends to media figures with who people form

parasocial relationships. Since some people are as emotionally involved with media figures as they are with family and friends, media figures also frequently show up in dreams. Interestingly, when they do appear in dreams, they are more likely to be involved in some sort of interpersonal relationship with the dreamer (Alperstein, 2003).

## The Parasocial Break-up

Similar to interpersonal and social relationships, people tend to experience emotional distress with the dissolution of parasocial relationships, or parasocial breakups. Cohen (2003) found that while gender was the most significant predictor of parasocial relationship intensity (women form more intense parasocial relationships), age was the most significant predictor of parasocial breakup anxiety. Teens expected to be more upset by parasocial breakups than adults (Cohen, 2003). Eyal and Cohen (2006) examined parasocial breakup in light of the television series *Friends* being taken off the air after ten years. Respondents' intensity of parasocial relationship with their favorite character was the strongest predictor of parasocial breakup distress. Other significant factors predicting parasocial breakup distress were "commitment to the show, affinity to the show, the perceived popularity of the favorite character, and participants' loneliness" (p. 516). This study also found that although parasocial breakups followed a similar pattern to social breakups, they were less stressful for people than dissolutions of close interpersonal relationships (Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

## Agenda Setting Theory

The phenomenon of parasocial relationships has been studied in the contexts of many different communication and psychological theories. Applying uses and gratifications theory to parasocial relationships has been widely studied, and is still relevant for future studies on

parasocial interaction. As viewers form intense, emotional bonds with media figures, these imaginary relationships become a source of stability and security in an otherwise turbulent world.

Agenda setting is another mass communication theory relevant to the current study. Agenda setting is the theory that the media has a great influence over the public's perception of a given issue's importance (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). While the media may not tell people what to think, agenda setting theory posits that the media does tell people about which issues to think, the issues that are worthy of their attention. Agenda setting research has also explored how media coverage effects issue salience (Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980).

Subsequent agenda setting research has determined that the power of the media's agenda setting effects are dependent on an individual's need for orientation (Weaver, 1980; Matthes, 2006). As defined by Weaver (1980), need for orientation is comprised of an individual's level of uncertainty about an issue and that issue's relevance to the individual. High uncertainty and high relevance would lead to a high need for orientation.

Weaver's construct of need for orientation (1980) is based on the psychological theory of cognitive mapping. A utilitarian motivation theory, cognitive mapping suggests that each person works to "map" his or her world, know his or her physical and cognitive surroundings enough to fill in details in order to self-orient to different situations (Tolman, 1932).

The present study investigated the relationships between respondents' need for orientation, level of uncertainty, and strength of parasocial interaction.

## Method

### Procedure and Sample

A convenience sample of students (*N*=104) at Rochester Institute of Technology completed an email survey in January 2011. The survey took approximately ten minutes to complete. The sample was 68.3% female and ranged in age from 18 to 57 years (*M*=23.3). The sample was comprised 79.9% of respondents identifying as Caucasian or White, 8.7% identifying as African American or Black, 3.8% identifying as Asian or Pacific Islander, 3.8% identifying as Hispanic or Latino, and 3.8% identifying as Multiracial.

### Measurement

The survey consisted of four parts. In the first part respondents were asked about their parasocial interaction using an adapted version of Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) Audience-Persona Interaction Scale, in order to determine strength of respondents' parasocial interaction. Out of the original 22-item scale, 19 items were used in the present study. The three items from the original study omitted in the present study only apply when respondents have all watched the same predetermined television clip. Also, in place of "FAV," which stood for "My favorite character from the show I just watched," and "CHARS," which stood for "The characters from the show I just watched," in the original study, this study used "FMF," which stands for "Favorite media figure." Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with each of the 19 phrases using a closed-ended, ordered response scale where 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree. The responses to all 19 items were then summed to form a single score of strength of parasocial interaction.

The second part of the survey inquired as to respondents' self-reported level of uncertainty concerning state of the world and respondents' need for orientation. Lacking a previously developed measure for level of uncertainty concerning the state of the world, six belief statements pertaining to the respondent's level of uncertainty about their perceived state of the world were created especially for the present study. Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with the six statements using a closed-ended, ordered response scale where 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree. The responses from survey items 1, 2, 4, 7, 9, and 12 of part two were summed to yield a single score of respondents' level of uncertainty about their perceived state of the world.

To measure respondents' need for orientation, the current study created six belief statements pertaining to the respondent's need for orientation. Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with the six statements using a close-ended, ordered response scale where 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree. The responses from survey items 3, 5, 6, 8, 10 and 11 of part two were summed to form a single score of respondents' need for orientation.

Part three of the survey measured the strength of the respondent's self-reported closest interpersonal relationship. Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with each of the eight statements using a closed-ended, ordered response scale where 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree. The belief statements used in this section of the survey were adapted from Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) Audience-Persona Interaction Scale, however instead of asking respondents about their favorite media figure (FMF) as in part one of the survey, respondents answered belief statements about their

closest interpersonal relationship (CIR). The belief statements selected for this part of the survey were selected to be representative of the belief statements used in part one of the survey in order to achieve a comparable measure of closest interpersonal relationship with the measure of favorite media figure. Responses were summed to form a single measure of strength of self-reported closest interpersonal relationship.

The fourth part of the survey asked respondents to provide different demographic information, such as age, race, and sex to describe the sample. See Appendix B for survey cover letter and Appendix C for survey in full.

## Results

*RQ 1: What is the relationship between self-reported strength of parasocial relationships and the level of uncertainty about the state of the world?*

A Pearson Correlation test was run on the variables "Respondents' Strength of Parasocial Interaction" and "Respondents' Self-Reported Level of Uncertainty." The Pearson Correlation yielded r=. 30, p= .002, a modest, statistically significant, positive correlation between respondents' strength of parasocial relationship and their level of uncertainty about the state of the world.

*RQ 2: What is the difference between high self-reported strength of parasocial relationships and low self-reported strength of parasocial relationships and the overall level of self-reported need for orientation?*

A two-sample t-test was used to determine the difference between respondents who reported a high strength of parasocial interaction and respondents who reported a low strength of parasocial interaction, and respondents' self-reported overall need for orientation.  To determine

a "high" or "low" level of parasocial interaction, the mean score of all respondents' self-reported strength of parasocial interaction was calculated (65.5). Individual respondent's self-reported strength of parasocial interaction below the mean was classified as a low level of parasocial interaction and above the mean was classified as a high level of parasocial interaction.

The t-test was significant (t= 2.33, df=95, p=. 022). Respondents in the "high" level of parasocial interaction group reported a higher need for orientation than respondents in the "low" level of parasocial interaction group.

*RQ 3: What differences are there by self-reported strength of interpersonal interaction, self-reported strength of parasocial relationship and overall level of self-reported need for orientation?*

A two-way analysis of variance was performed to determine the differences between respondents' self-reported strength of interpersonal interaction and self-reported strength of parasocial relationship, and respondents' overall level of self-reported need for orientation. The same method as was used in RQ #2 to determine "high" or "low" strength of parasocial interaction was used to determine whether a response was categorized as "high" or "low" strength of interpersonal interaction, using the mean score of 28.8.

The two-way analysis of variance resulted a significance value of .052 for the difference between respondents who reported a high level of strength of interpersonal relationship and respondents who reported a low level of interpersonal relationship and respondents'' self-reported need for orientation. The significance of .052 was also found to exist between respondents who reported a high level of strength of parasocial interaction and respondents who reported a low level of strength of parasocial interaction and respondents' self-reported need for

orientation. The interaction effect between respondents' self-reported strength of parasocial interaction and respondents' self-reported strength of interpersonal interaction was nonsignificant.

## Discussion

The Pearson Correlation showed a significant, although modest, positive relationship between respondents' strength of parasocial interaction and their level of uncertainty about the world. Although the current research project cannot speculate as to causation, it would seem intuitive that as a respondent's self-reported level of uncertainty rises, so does that respondent's self-reported strength of parasocial interaction. In other words, the more uncertain a respondent reported being about his or her world, the stronger the parasocial interaction experienced by that respondent. This interpretation suggests that respondents seek parasocial interaction as a means to reduce their uncertainty about things occurring in the world outside of their control, e.g. economic problems and the threat of terrorism.

This interpretation is not merely intuitive. Caughey (1994) found that the media figure with whom a person forms a parasocial relationship (called the *persona*) could act as an "ideal" for that person. Among other consequences, this means that a person may use the media figure with which they form a parasocial relationship in fill in missing, or unsure, aspects of their personality or life (Caughey, 1994).

Additionally, Hoffner (1996) found peoples' favorite chosen media characters serve both as friends and role models. Turner (1993) and Rubin and McHugh (1987) found that viewers are more likely to form parasocial relationships with personae whose perceived attitudes coincided with those of the viewer. These findings suggest similarities between interpersonal and

parasocial relationships.  Perse and Rubin (1989) also found that parasocial interaction was similar to interpersonal interaction because both are based on uncertainty reduction and the ability to accurately predict the feelings and behavior of the *persona*.

Given that a person may turn to interpersonal relationships to reduce uncertainty about elements of the world outside his or her control, and that parasocial relationships follow many similar patterns as interpersonal relationships, the literature supports the interpretation that parasocial relationships can serve to reduce uncertainty.

In regard to high and low strength of parasocial relationships and their need for orientation t-tests showed a significant difference: High parasocial relationship respondents had a significantly higher need for orientation than low parasocial.

As previously discussed in the literature review, Weaver's (1980) construct of need for orientation is based in the theory of cognitive mapping. Cognitive mapping refers to when individuals work to "map" his or her world, know his or her physical and cognitive surroundings enough to fill in details in order to self-orient to different situations (Tolman 1932).  Need for orientation is comprised of an individual's level of uncertainty about an issue and that issue's relevance to the individual.

The results showed a significant difference between high and low parasocial interaction and need for orientation: high parasocial level of parasocial interaction respondents had a significantly higher need for orientation. This result is further supported by the results found in research question one, since need for orientation is in part comprised of level of uncertainty.

The results for research question two suggest that parasocial interaction and relationships may play a significant role in an individual's cognitive mapping and need for orientation. It is

worth restating Caughey's (1994) findings that the persona can fill in missing aspects, or what viewers perceive as missing aspects in their [viewers'] own personalities and lives.  Since cognitive mapping directly involves the process by which individuals fill in missing details in order to self-orient to different situations, parasocial interaction may serve to reduce uncertainty for individuals with a high need for orientation because the parasocial relationship is a source of information the individual can draw from when engaging in the process of cognitive mapping.

The two-way analysis of variance showed no significant interaction effect between strength of interpersonal interaction and strength of parasocial interaction on need for orientation. This means that a high or low level of self-reported strength of interpersonal relationship produced no greater or lesser need for orientation in the respondent when compared to the same respondent's self-reported strength of parasocial interaction.  In other words, the strength of parasocial interaction produces no greater or lesser need for orientation than does the strength of interpersonal interaction.

This finding is supported not only by the previous findings of the current study, but also by outside research. As discussed, parasocial interaction follows similar patterns as interpersonal interaction. An individual with a high need for orientation will seek both interpersonal interaction and parasocial interaction in order to reduce uncertainty.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Limitations of the research project include self-reported data from a convenience sample of students.

A positive correlation between strength of parasocial interaction and level of uncertainty was reported but causation is undetermined. Though intuition leads to the conclusion that as an

individual's level of uncertainty increases so does that individual's strength of parasocial interaction, future research should attempt to determine the link between these variables.

It is also worth noting that need for orientation is made up of both an individual's level of uncertainty about a certain issue and that issue's relevance to the individual. The variable of issue relevance was not measured in the current study, but perhaps given the demographics of the sample surveyed (college students) the variable of issue relevance should be further explored, as middle-aged respondents may not attach the same level of relevance to the items that the current study's survey used to measure respondents' uncertainty and need for orientation. In order to more accurately measure need for orientation and level of uncertainty, a more universal scale may need to be developed. Additionally, the current study may have produced an unrealistic representation of need for orientation if respondents attached a high level of relevance to the issues presented in the survey due to life cycle stage and age.

Future research should also seek to incorporate respondents' media exposure, specifically amount and type, to determine how this variable has any significant effect on parasocial interaction or the factors making up an individual's need for orientation.

 Future research on parasocial interaction and world stability should focus on *how* parasocial relationships can provide a source of stability. While the current study determined a positive correlation between level of uncertainty and strength of parasocial interaction, as well as a significant difference between high and low level of parasocial respondents and their need for orientation, the exact role parasocial relationships play in mediating this uncertainty about the outside world is currently undetermined.

**Conclusion**

The current research study sought to determine what relationships and differences exist between strength of parasocial interaction, uncertainty about the state of the world, and need for orientation in an attempt to determine how parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships serve as a source of stability for respondents.

Much research remains to be conducted regarding parasocial relationships and the role these relationships play in uncertainty reduction. The current study determined that a significant relationship does exist between respondents' self-reported strength of parasocial relationship and level of uncertainty concerning respondents' perceived state of the world, as well as respondents' self-reported strength of parasocial relationship and need for orientation. While this study has made clear that these relationships do in fact exist, the exact role and influence of parasocial interaction on the variables of level of uncertainty and need for orientation deserves further research.

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## Appendix A: Survey Cover Letter

Dear [recipient's name]:

My name is Rachel Provenzano and I am graduate student in RIT's Communication & Media Technologies program. The topic of my thesis investigates the way college students use media in their daily lives and their perceptions about the world. You are one of a small number of college students whose thoughts I would like on such matters, which will help contribute to Communication research and fulfillment of a Master's thesis in Communication & Media Technology.

Pretests have shown that it takes less than ten minutes to complete this survey. You may be assured of complete confidentiality. Your name will never appear in the survey results, and I, as the project director, will be the only person with access to survey responses.

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions posed in the survey.  Participation in the survey is completely voluntary; and you can stop participating at any point. Should you experience any discomfort as a result of taking this survey, contact the counseling center at 585-475-2261, second floor of the August Center (Bldg. 23A).

Should you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them. Please email (rxp2584@rit.edu) or call (585) 748-2201.

Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Rachel Provenzano
Project Director

**Appendix B: Survey**


**Media Figure and World Perception Survey**


**Part I.** I would like to learn about your favorite media figure (FMF). This could be an actual person or fictional character about whom you feel strongly.

First, please write the name of your FMF on the line below:

_____


Next, please indicate your agreement with the following statements by circling one number for each statement.


**1=Strongly Disagree (SD)**
**2=Disagree**
**3=Neither Agree nor Disagree;**
**4=Agree**
**5=Strongly Agree (SA)**


|  | **SD** |  |  |  | **SA** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| FMF reminds me of myself | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I have the same qualities as FMF | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I seem to have the same beliefs or attitudes as FMF | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I have the same problems as FMF | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I can imagine myself as FMF | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I can identify with FMF | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I enjoyed trying to predict what FMF would do | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I hope FMF achieves his or her goals | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I care about what happens to FMF | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

I like hearing the voice of FMF.........................................1    2    3    4    5

FMF's interactions are similar to mine with friends......1    2    3    4    5

                                                      **SD**                              **SA**

FMF's interactions are similar to mine with family.......1    2    3    4    5

My friends are like FMF.....................................................1    2    3    4    5

I'd enjoy interacting with FMF and
my friends at same time....................................................1    2    3    4    5

I can relate to FMF's attitudes.........................................1    2    3    4    5

I wish I could handle problems as well as FMF...............1    2    3    4    5

I like the way FMF handles problems..............................1    2    3    4    5

I would like to be more like FMF.....................................1    2    3    4    5

I usually agree with FMF...................................................1    2    3    4    5

---

**Part II.** Next, I'd like to ask you about your perceptions about the world around you. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements by circling one number for each statement.

**1=Strongly Disagree (SD)**
**2=Disagree**
**3=Neither Agree nor Disagree**
**4=Agree**
**5=Strongly Agree (SA)**

                                                      **SD**                              **SA**
I feel confident that I will be able to get a job after
graduation.........................................................................1    2    3    4    5

I think I will stay in the same career field
throughout my working life..............................................1    2    3    4    5

I am not worried about my future financial stability..........1    2    3    4    5

I think the current economic recession is only
temporary..............................................................................1          2          3          4          5

I am concerned about how current health care issues
will effect my future..........................................................1          2          3          4          5


|  | SD |  |  | SA |
|---|---|---|---|---|

I am concerned about how the current economic
recession will effect my future.........................................1          2          3          4          5

I think the likelihood of another terrorism attack
in the United States is high................................................1          2          3          4          5

I think the likelihood of another terrorism attack in
the United States directly effecting my life is high..............1          2          3          4          5

I have a clear vision of what my future will
be like.................................................................................1          2          3          4          5

I am concerned how the growing divorce rate
will effect me.....................................................................1          2          3          4          5

I feel that the media is a source of stability for me.............1          2          3          4          5

Overall, I feel like the world is a stable place......................1          2          3          4          5

---

**Part III.** Now, I'd like to learn about your relationships with important people in your life.

First, please specify the type of relationship that best describes your closest interpersonal relationship (Ex. Sister, mother, best friend, boyfriend/girlfriend) on the line below.

_____

Next, please indicate your agreement with the following statements by circling one number for each statement, keeping in mind the person you identified as your closest interpersonal relationship (CIR).


**1=Strongly Disagree (SD)**
**2=Disagree**
**3=Neither Agree nor Disagree;**
**4=Agree**
**5=Strongly Agree (SA)**

|  | **SD** |  |  |  | **SA** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CIR reminds me of myself............................................1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I have the same qualities as CIR...................................1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I seem to have the same beliefs or attitudes as CIR.....1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

|  | **SD** |  |  |  | **SA** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I can relate to CIR's attitudes...........................................1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I wish I could handle problems as well as CIR...............1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I like the way CIR handles problems..............................1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I would like to be more like CIR.......................................1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I usually agree with CIR......................................................1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

**Part IV.** Finally, the last set of questions asks about selected personal characteristics. Your responses will be used only for statistical purposes.

1. Are you

    ___Male
    ___Female

2. What age were you on your most recent birthday?
    ___ years old

3. Ethnic group (Check one response)
    ___ African American or Black
    ___ Asian or Pacific Islander
    ___ Caucasian or White
    ___ Hispanic/Latino
    ___ Multiracial
    ___ Native American (Indian, Alaskan, Hawaiian)

Please write any additional thoughts or comments you may have.

Would you like to receive a summary of the survey results?

___Yes
        If yes, please provide an email for the results to be sent_____

___No