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**The socio-psychological aspects of the personalization of politics:
Examining the process, conditional factors, and implications of parasocial
relationships with political figures**

A dissertation presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor in Philosophy
in
Psychology

At Massey University, Albany
New Zealand

Moh Abdul Hakim

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Statement of Authorship

The three empirical studies that compose this thesis have all been written for publication. I am the primary author on each paper, having developed the ideas, conducted and interpreted the analyses, and authored the final articles. Chapter 2 is currently under review by the journal *Political Psychology*. Chapter 3 has been given *receive and resubmit* by the *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*. Chapter 4 is currently under review by the *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*.

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General Abstract

Amidst the growing complexity of modern politics, it has been documented that people tend to focus more on individual candidates instead of parties, developing psychological bonds with them personally. Although this phenomenon has been under much discussion recently, the socio-psychological explanation of political personalization in the literature is still largely scant. In addressing this gap, I advocate for the use of parasocial relationship theory to explain the social psychological aspects of political personalization. According to this theory, people have the ability to develop a one-sided feeling of intimacy with popular figures from a distance, as they repeatedly encounter the figures through media (conceptualized as *parasocial relationships*). To show the utility of this concept, I present a series of evidence showing the validity as well as generalisability of parasocial relationships with political figures as a psychological construct across Indonesia, New Zealand, and the United States in Chapter 2. Interestingly, our analyses also indicated that the type of political systems (presidential vs parliamentary) and the level of democratic maturity of a country play a crucial role in facilitating the formation of parasocial relationships with politicians. In Chapter 3, I demonstrate that parasocial relationships with political candidates are consistently linked to political news consumption. Moreover, this link was found to be largely mediated by experiences of being in imaginary interactions with the candidates during the news exposure situations. In Chapter 4, our analyses suggest that the presence of social media is likely to amplify the personalization of politics. It was revealed that those who frequently use social media are more likely to engage in social media interactions with political figures, leading to the formation of parasocial relationships with them. Finally, in Chapter 5, I elaborate on the theoretical implications of my findings within the broader context

of the political psychology literature on political attachments. The practical implications of the findings are discussed in light of the rising popularity of the use of media technologies to cultivate people's sense of intimacy with political candidates.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Politics in contemporary democracy is increasingly dominated by popular political figures. Those figures are gaining a more central role in political dynamics as voter turnout in many major democracies is declining, political parties are struggling to retain members, and professional politicians are increasingly despised or deemed untrustworthy (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018). On the other hand, a new generation of politicians is increasingly capable of exploiting old and new media platforms, especially social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, to promote themselves as individuals instead of representatives of political parties (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Utilizing these media platforms, political candidates no longer need to depend so much on traditional political organizations to gain votes, and have the capacity to establish direct communication with their followers, enabling the development of psychological bonds from voters to the candidates personally (Lee & Shin, 2012). Scholars recently call this trend as a form of the personalization of politics (Adam & Maier, 2010).

In Indonesia, such a phenomenon was exemplified by Joko Widodo's victory (Jokowi) in the 2014 Presidential Election. Deemed as the outsider to national politics, Jokowi was only a mayor of a small town three years before the election, with little connection to the military, the wealthy families, and the political elites -three powerful groups that have dominated Indonesian politics for decades. Born to a poor family who used to live in a river slum, Jokowi had thrived to become a successful local furniture entrepreneur before started his political career. Within a short period of time, Jokowi advanced from small-town mayor to the President, a political fairytale for Indonesia's young democracy (Lamb, 2019). Among many other factors, it was

Jokowi's personality and life story that seems to have inspired a large number of voters to support his presidential candidacy. Jokowi's masterful exploitation of multiple mass media platforms, including social media, to share his stories is reported to have played a pivotal role in his election (Irawanto, 2019). As Jokowi admitted in a speech during the 2018 ASEAN Summit, "Since the arrival of Netflix, we politicians have no choice but to turn politics into reality TV because if we don't, all of you will watch *House of Cards* and *Stranger Things* instead of watching us." ("Indonesia's Joko Widodo", 2018). Indeed, it is the mass media that brought Jokowi's story to the national spotlight, enabling him to rapidly gain popularity, and eventually galvanized a wave of Jokowi-mania throughout the country (Irawanto, 2019). Jokowi was elected as a president through the Indonesian popular voting system despite his short political career, a loose connection with political parties, a disorganized campaign team and volunteers, and more critically, his lack of experience in the national politics.

Meanwhile, people in the United States seem to have their own story with the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Never having held any office or political position, Trump was nominated as the Republican presidential candidate after defeating the party's establishment candidates such as Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, and John Kasich in the primaries. Apart from the nomination, it is reported that Trump's campaign team had to deal with enormous problems throughout the campaign trail because of limited funds, lukewarm support from the party's establishment, and various scandals around Trump's personal life (Wolff, 2018). Even Trump himself seemed rather skeptical about his campaign. "This thing is so fucked up" (p. 12), Trump told his inner circle as reported by Michael Wolff (2018) in *Fire and Fury*. Despite all of these, Trump won the election against the Democratic frontrunner, Hillary Clinton, which surprised many political strategists and scholars around the world. Recent studies have documented that Trump' celebrity status and

his extraordinary ability to effectively utilize social media played a pivotal role his victory (Cohen & Holbert, 2018; Francia, 2018). Gabriel, Paravati, Green, and Flomsbee (2018) specifically found that Trump's regular appearance on a reality show *The Apprentice* significantly help build strong psychological bonds with potential future supporters across the ideological spectrum, which eventually translated into a significant number of votes in the election (Gabriel, et al., 2018).

The phenomena of political personalization apparently are not a limited to presidential systems such as Indonesia and US. New Zealand, with its long tradition of a parliamentary system, also showed a similar trend with the rise of Jacinda Ardern in the 2017 General Election. Jacinda Ardern was appointed as the leader of New Zealand's Labor Party just seven weeks before the election, becoming the youngest leader in the party's history. Jacinda's rapid rise to national politics sparked the public interest; not only her political career, the private aspects of her life also got extensive coverage from both national and international media, giving her a celebrity status rarely seen in the New Zealand politics. This was amplified with her skills of exploiting social media (e.g. she regularly posted messages and broadcasted videos on Facebook) to build closeness with the people (Jennings, 2017). Her rise was so impressive igniting Jacindamania throughout the country (Fitzpatrick, 2017). Along with it, the Labor's percentage of the popular vote soared from 24% prior to Jacinda's leadership (the lowest in the party's history) to 35% of votes in the general election, enabling the party to form a government with the support of two other smaller parties (Green Party and New Zealand First). Similar to the story of Jokowi and Trump, Jacinda Ardern was elected as the prime minister despite the fact that she had only been in politics for eight years.

It has been widely reported that such phenomena are evident in other major democracies, such as in France with the rise of Emmanuel Macron (Marnham, 2017), Canada with Justin Trudeau (Lalancette & Raynaud, 2019), and the UK with Tony Blair (Foley, 2008). From policy and ideological points of view, it is certainly difficult to imagine that political figures as diverse as Jokowi, Jacinda, Trump, Macron, and Trudeau fall into the same political category. For example, the protectionism and nationalism advocated by Trump with the slogan of American First are in stark contrast to Jacinda Ardern's political expressions of empathy and globalism. Despite the diversity in terms of policy and ideology, however, those political leaders arguably share certain common qualities, especially in the way they engage with the voters: their electoral appeal is strongly built upon their personal characteristics and media coverage of their private life. As Schneider (1991) succinctly put it when describing Bill Clinton's and Boris Yeltsin's personalism in the early '90s: "The people support them, not their party or their ideology. They don't need a party or an ideology. They have television."

Personalization of Politics

In the existing literature on politics and communication, the emergence of candidate-centered political behavior has been extensively studied under the umbrella term of the "personalization of politics" (Adam & Maier, 2010). More specifically, Rahat and Shafer (2007) defined the personalization of politics as a process describing the increased relevance of individual political actors compared to collective political organizations such as political parties. According to Rahat and Kenig (2018), the process of political personalization may be identified in different political domains; at the macro level it may occur in the form of the personalization of institutions (e.g. party and government) and news media, while at the individual level it can be observed from the personalized behaviors of political figures and their voters.

Institutional personalization. Institutional personalization refers to a political process that enhances the centrality of the persons in the institution while the influence of the institution (including institutional rules, traditions, and collective decision-making) itself is diminished by comparison (Rahat & Kenig, 2018). In parliamentary systems, this transformation can be seen with the adoption of direct elections of chief executives (i.e. prime minister) and members of parliament (Karvonen, 2010; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). Moreover, the continuing decline of party memberships, or *party dealignments*, has also been widely attributed as another indicator of institutional personalization (Garzia, 2011; 2013). Such changes are significant as these enhance the ability of political actors to act as individuals instead of merely being representatives of their political parties; these trends eventually also shift voters' attention from parties to political figures (Garzia, 2011; Lobo & Curtice, 2014; Poguntke & Webb, 2005). For instance, the replacement of a party-based list election (i.e. people vote for a party that will appoint the members of parliament or MPs) in Israel with a candidate-based system (i.e. people directly vote for their preferred MP candidates) is observed to have reinforced the centrality of individual candidates over their parties in many aspects of the Israeli political process (Gideon, 2008; Rahat & Shafer, 2007). Furthermore, applying this line of reasoning in comparative political contexts, the presidential system is also generally thought to be more personalized than the parliamentary system (Karvonen, 2010).

Media personalization. Media personalization alludes to a process in which the focus of media coverage has increasingly shifted from parties and policies to individual political actors. In personalized media, the actors are usually portrayed as 'ordinary' persons with personal characteristics, a life style, family life, hobbies, and so forth creating an illusion of intimacy to audiences (Adam & Maier, 2010; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2011).

Rahat and Kenig (2018) recently suggested that there are two parallel pathways of media personalization; the first pathway is where political actors employ a specific media-campaign strategy that focuses on themselves as individuals rather than as party representatives. One of the most common instances in contemporary campaigns is the utility of social media and personal websites by the candidates as the main tools to present themselves, and thus interacting virtually with voters (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Indeed, recent evidence suggests that information about political figures, especially those delivered personally by the figures, are more likely to draw attention from voters and invoke the voters' enjoyment and satisfaction (Kruikemeier, van Noort, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2013; Lee & Shin, 2012). The second pathway refers to the coverage of mainstream news media (e.g. television and newspapers) that increasingly focuses on the private life of political actors, or what Van Aelst, et al. (2011) called as *privatization*. This personalization of news coverages has been clearly identified in several major democracies, such as in France and Italy (Campus, 2010), the UK (Langer, 2007), and the USA (Stanyer, 2013) as well as in Israel (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007). However, evidence from other western countries showed negative (i.e. contradictory) patterns, or were mixed at best (Holtz-Bacha, Langer, & Merkle, 2014; Karvonen, 2010; Kriesi, 2012).

Behavioral personalization. The last domain of political personalization is behavioral, where voters tend to perceive politics as a game between competing political actors rather than between parties, and base their political preferences and voting decision on the political stances of their favored actors (Adam & Maier, 2010; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). There has been empirical evidence showing trends toward increasing behavioral personalization across countries. For instance, Lenz's (2018) cross-sectional and experimental research demonstrates that many American citizens are more likely to follow the policy positions of presidential candidates they

already favored rather than to evaluate the candidates critically based on the voters' own political stances. In a similar vein, Garzia (2011) shows evidence that the support for political parties in the Western European countries such as Germany, the UK, Italy, and the Netherlands is increasingly contingent upon people's evaluation of their party leaders over time instead of vice versa. More than the politicians' individual characteristics, however, in political personalization the non-political and private aspects of political actors such as their lifestyle, family, and personal history appears to have been also crucial in voters' considerations and decision making (Adam & Maier, 2010). In a recent French election, for instance, it was not only Macron's personality and professional background that sparked public interest: the story about his private life (e.g. his marriage with his former high school teacher) became an object of intense curiosity of the people and, consequently, received extensive coverage from mainstream news media. This contributed to Macron winning the election by a decisive margin (66.1%).

Despite the particularity of each domain of political personalization (i.e. institution, media, and behavior), they are closely intertwined theoretically and practically. For instance, institutional personalization has been theorized as a major driver for both media and behavioral personalization (McAllister, 2007). On the other hand, the personalization of mass media is thought to have played a critical role in facilitating the emergence of behavioral personalization (Adam & Maier, 2010; McAllister, 2007). While the body of literature on the personalization of institution and media has been dramatically growing over the past decade, yet some scholars such as Garzia (2013) and Rahat and Kenig (2018) specifically point out that there is still lack of psychological understanding as to why and how behavioral personalization of voters may emerge in particular situations. The present thesis concerns this socio-psychological aspect of political personalization in the behavioral domain.

The psychology of political personalization

The idea about political leaders as being central in people's political attitudes and behaviors is not entirely new in social and political psychology. In their classic work, Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) theorized about the centrality of the need for strong leaders in their authoritarian personality theory to explain why people were motivated to support Hitler and Nazism in the early 1930s. The theory posits that individuals with high authoritarian personality are predisposed to submitting themselves to the ruling authority and its strong leadership in order to share power, greatness, and fame (Adorno, et al., 1950; Oesterreich, 2005). Later developments of this research line have shown that authoritarian personality or authoritarianism is able to predict various form of prejudice against minority groups (see Sibley & Duckitt, 2010 for a review). In the context of contemporary democracy, however, the authoritarian personality model may not be relevant to explain the personalization of politics. Instead of taking the role of strong men and women, the political leaders who have been often described as exemplary cases of political personalization such as Tony Blair, Barack Obama, Emmanuel Macron, Justin Trudeau and Jacinda Ardern often present themselves as 'touchable' persons, and rely their electoral power on the ability to cultivate and maintain symbolic closeness with voters (Garzia, 2011).

Leader-Follower Personality Congruency. More recently, researchers of personality and politics have taken a new direction in their attempts to explain the psychological process underlying the personalization of politics. Specifically, the work of Caprara and his colleagues (2004) highlights the role of leader-follower personality congruency as a determining factor in voters' considerations and decision making. Caprara (2007) contends that voters in modern politics are more likely to employ a dispositional heuristic, a kind of judgmental heuristic that anchors

impressions and inferences about politicians' intentions to traits that are habitually used to describe oneself and others in everyday life. Their research program has demonstrated that people's vote for candidates can be essentially predicted by voters' perception of the candidate's personality compatibility with the preferred party's ideology, and the congruency of the candidate's personality with their own traits (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004). Although this approach may have merits, however, the sole focus on the candidates' and the voters' personality (i.e. traits and basic human values) in the model seems to undermine the importance of symbolic interpersonal relationship between voters and the candidates, which characterizes the personalization of voting behaviors in modern politics (Garia, 2011; Schneider, 1994). Moreover, the role of news media engagement which becomes a critical aspect of the personalization of politics has been only implicitly elaborated as the context for the personality congruence process, instead of being theorized as an integral part of political personalization. Consequently, the role of news media engagement in the socio-psychological process of political personalization has not been sufficiently examined in this model.

In addressing the limitations of prior social psychological approaches to the personalization of politics, in the present doctoral project, I employed the concept of parasocial relationships to examine the socio-psychological process underlying personalization of politics. Using this framework, the current doctoral thesis attempts to explore voters' symbolic closeness with political actors as a form of parasocial relationship, defined as a one-sided and enduring intimacy at a distance that ordinary people feel towards particular political figures. Although symbolic in nature, it has been theorized that the social psychological processes involved in parasocial relationships with public figures (i.e. celebrities, broadcasters, and political leaders) mirror those in real interpersonal relationships (e.g. friendships) (Horton & Strauss, 1957).

Indeed, Horton and Wohl (1956) asserted that parasocial relationships can develop as people frequently encounter and get familiar with the figures through mass media. Despite being relatively unpopular within the current social and political psychology literature, the construct of parasocial relationships has been extensively researched in the field of media and communication psychology. For instance, researchers have recently demonstrated that individuals who hold parasocial relationships with particular public figures are motivated to nurture such relationships as though they are in relationships with real persons (Gabriel, Valenti, & Young, 2016). The disappearance or withdrawal of the admired figures from public life is also found to generate significant experiences of grief and loss among the followers (E. L. Cohen & Hoffner, 2016; Eyal & Cohen, 2006).

Within this particular frame of reference, people's symbolic intimacy with political actors is seen as a psychological connection at the symbolic level that evolves from interpersonal mechanisms. This understanding potentially illuminates the distinct socio-psychological processes underlying political personalization as compared to the group-based political affiliations. Unlike partisanship that is formed on the basis of one's in-group identification with a party, parasocial relationships are theorized to revolve around one's feeling of intimacy with the admired figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). It is the central role of interpersonal processes in parasocial relationships that match well the features of the personalization of politics. Indeed, there are burgeoning political science literature showing that the tendency of many politicians in modern politics to build their campaigns around personal appeals instead of party or ideology, open up their private lives to the public, and employ direct communication in order to cultivate interpersonal intimacy with voters (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Lee & Shin, 2012). On the other hand, research also found that voters are more likely to react to personalized messages delivered

directly through social media by the candidates than that ‘official’ news from the parties that are focused on policy platforms (Kruikemeier, van Noort, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2013).

Thesis Overview

The main purpose of the current thesis is to examine the socio-psychological nature, process, consequences, as well as the conditional factors of political personalization by focusing specifically on voters’ parasocial relationships with political actors. The core of this thesis is comprised of three independent yet tightly linked journal-article-formatted chapters addressing different aspects of political parasocial relationships.

Chapter 2. Voters’ symbolic closeness with political figures as a form of parasocial relationships

In this chapter, I further elaborate my arguments on the relevance of parasocial relationship as the socio-psychological explanation for political personalization. I identify several psychometric problems in the existing measures of parasocial relationships that may hinder the application of the concept in the field of social and political psychology. Attending to this problem, I introduce the development of a new scale specifically designed to measure parasocial relationships with political figures (i.e the PSR-P Scale). To support the utility of the scale, I present a set of cross-national evidence from Indonesia, New Zealand, and the US showing the ability of the PSR-P scale to assess political parasocial relationships equally across political systems (presidential vs parliamentary systems), as well as produce scores that reflect the substantive political differences across the systems.

More importantly, the scale has the ability to conceptually and psychometrically distinguish parasocial relationships with political actors from other psycho-political constructs, such as political ideology, authoritarianism, and belief in benevolent authority. At the theoretical level, the findings are crucial as these confirm that the personalization of politics is essentially a manifestation of symbolic interpersonal process, and were not consistently associated with political ideologies or authoritarian tendencies. Additionally, the study also revealed the motivational components inherent in parasocial relationships. It was found that people who are parasocially attached to political figures are more likely to have higher political efficacy, greater political interest, and higher political elaboration across countries. In summary, the evidence presented in Chapter 2 is supportive of my core argument that the symbolic closeness felt by people towards particular political figures that characterize political personalization is essentially a form of parasocial relationship, and therefore, it should be studied and measured under this conceptual framework.

Chapter 3. Explaining the development of political parasocial relationships

The study presented in Chapter 2 paved the way for my further investigations of the follow up questions, namely how and why are parasocial relationships formed in political contexts? What is the role of news engagement in the development of parasocial relationships with political figures? To what extent are political parasocial relationships able to predict the holders' political attitudes and voting intentions?

News coverage that focuses on individual political actors, instead of political party or policy, has been attributed as the external factor that drives the formation of voters' personal intimacy with politicians (Adam & Maier, 2010; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). However, this notion seems rather

inconsistent with the objective count of news contents from many western countries. In several countries with recorded trends toward the personalization of voting behaviors, the number of personalized news contents appears to be steady or mixed at best over time (Holtz-Bacha, Langer, & Merkle, 2014; Karvonen, 2010; Kriesi, 2012). Addressing to this issue, in Chapter 3, I argued that it is people's subjective experiences which transform engagement with the news to the development of symbolic intimacy with political actors. In the current study, the news story is thought to be a form of narrative. As any other narrative, the news stories have immersive qualities that can pull the individuals into the social worlds described within, comprising social situations, places, political actors, and the dynamics of relationships and conflict between the actors. A body of evidence suggest that through such narratively constructed social worlds, people can engage in imaginary interactions with the characters in the narratives (Oatley, 1999), such as political actors (in this case), and develop parasocial relationships with them. Importantly, the parasocial relationships emerging from such imagined interactions, even though symbolic, have potent and powerful influences on people's social behaviors in real life (Gabriel, et al., 2016).

In this chapter, I present the evidence that such symbolic interpersonal dynamics may occur in the context of politics. Using the US presidential election as the case, I found that the more people engage with political news from multiple media, the more likely to would develop parasocial relationships with presidential candidates (Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders, and Beto O'Rourke), mediated either fully or partially by imaginary social interactions with the candidates. Given these findings, I proceeded further by examining the implications of having parasocial relationships with the presidential candidates on one's support for the candidates' policy issues and intentions to vote for them. As predicted in my pre-registered hypotheses,

parasocial relationships were able to explain a great deal of variances of policy support and voting intentions consistently for all four candidates, even greater than the variances explained by the traditional voting factors in the US politics, including demographic (i.e. age, gender, education, ethnic groups) and political variables (i.e. party affiliations and political ideology). In short, the findings confirmed the argument that the electoral success of presidential candidates, at least in the US contexts, appears to depend, in a large part, on the candidates' ability to cultivate and maintain parasocial relationships among the voters.

One could argue, however, that parasocial relationship may only matter for individuals with less tendencies to think analytically. Indeed, it has been widely argued in the studies of electoral behavior that people of low analytic thinking are less likely to consider substantive factors such as policy issues in their political preferences and voting choices, and rely instead on more emotional considerations such as the personal appeals of the candidates (Lenz, 2010). In a similar vein, social psychology literature suggests that, in individuals of low analytical tendency (low need for cognition), emotional sentiments such as parasocial bonds are more likely to directly influence attitudes unmediated by deliberative thoughts (Petty, Schumann, Richman & Strathman, 1993). To explore this possibility, I examined whether individuals differences in analytical tendency (low versus high need for cognition) may inhibit the effects of parasocial relationships with the US presidential candidates. In contrast to the predictions, however, the analysis revealed that the effects of parasocial relationships were not constrained by the high tendency of analytical thinking. I even found the opposite effect for Donald Trump; among individuals with high analytical tendency, the associations between parasocial relationships with Trump and support for his policy issues and voting intentions for him were even stronger. Further research is, however, needed to replicate and explain this 'Trump exceptionalism.'

Chapter 4: Political parasocial relationships within the social media space

In this chapter, I attempted to situate the personalization of politics within the context of a new media environment, especially by emphasizing the role of social media in facilitating the development of parasocial relationships with political figures. Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, offer a high-choice and more egalitarian mass media environment which allows users to not only access political news through social networking, but also to get messages directly from political actors (e.g., presidents, prime ministers, and other politicians). Within this context of social media, people can engage directly with politicians by following the social media fan page or twitter account of a public figure, and liking, commenting on, and sharing what the figure has posted (Dunn & Nisbett, 2014; Kim & Song, 2016; Lee & Shin, 2012). As I will elaborate further in Chapter 4, I asserted that such interactive features of social media have lowered the threshold for political engagements, and, hence, are attractive for people with low interest in political issues, especially passive news consumers. Gil de Zúñiga, et al (2017) described passive news consumption as typical social media users characterized with a belief that one can indirectly stay informed about public affairs - despite not actively following the news – by relying on peers within online social networks. Given this, the lack of desire among passive news consumers to find political news may drive the passive news consumer to get involved in social media interactions with politicians. Unlike active news consumption that requires a certain amount of effort, parasocial interactions with politicians on social media are easy acts to perform and yet evoke personal satisfaction (Schumann & Klein, 2015). Furthermore, interacting with politicians parasocially on social media permits a passive news consumer to employ the interpersonal relationship schema, that is naturally intuitive, to evaluate and understand politicians as individuals rather than as party representatives (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004;

Garzia, 2011). There is a comfort zone here where the rarified domain of national politics can be treated as just another social interaction with a liked or admired other. In conclusion, I contend in this chapter the passive mode of political news consumption within social media space is likely to encourage users to get involved in parasocial interactions with political candidates leading to the formation of parasocial relationships.

Chapter 5: General conclusions and limitations

This chapter concludes the thesis by discussing the socio-psychological features of political personalization that emerges from my empirical studies. People may develop emotional intimacy with political candidates personally regardless of the voters' and the candidates' affiliation with political party or ideology. This symbolic intimacy with political figures was not only found within presidential systems like the US and Indonesia where the politicians traditionally occupy a central role in the electoral contestations, people in parliamentary systems in which political parties are usually dominant (i.e. the UK, and New Zealand) might also have the similar experience. The evidence presented in this thesis adds several important insights regarding the social psychology of political personalization. First of all, some people do employ interpersonal frameworks when processing political news. Specifically, when engaging with news stories, people may be involved in imaginary interactions with political actors described within the narratives, paving the way for the formation of parasocial relationships with them. Because of its interpersonal nature, the parasocial relationship with a political figure was unique as a construct, and conceptually and psychometrically distinguishable from other psycho-political concepts (i.e. authoritarianism, political ideology, and belief in benevolent authority). Furthermore, it tends to contain little political substance, and, thus, may be experienced by voters across ideological spectrum and partisanship.

Despite these, however, a parasocial relationship with a politician seems to have certain motivational components; those who hold it tend to have higher political interest and political elaboration, and greater political efficacy. Interestingly, these patterns were found to be fairly consistent across political settings (i.e. Indonesia, New Zealand, and the US). For the US context, especially, my analyses revealed that parasocial relationships with particular presidential candidates strongly predicted the support for the candidate's policy stances and the intention to vote for them. These effects were even greater than those of party identity and liberal-conservative ideology, two traditional voting predictors in the US electoral politics.

In addition to the traditional news media, the use of social media seems to have amplified the tendency to form parasocial relationships with political candidates. One obvious reason is that social media have a lowering effect; people can actually interact with the candidates with lower effort and yet in a more exciting way by following, reading, liking, commenting on, and sharing the candidates' social media posts.

Chapter 2: Measuring the feeling of distant intimacy with politicians across countries: Development, construct validity, and replicability of the parasocial relationship with a political figure (PSR-P) scale

Abstract

Parasocial theory views ordinary people's emotional bonding with political figures as a form of parasocial relationship. As existing measures of parasocial relationship have been criticised conceptually and psychometrically, we developed a new scale of parasocial relationship with a political figure (PSR-P). Construct validity, factor replicability and measurement invariance were assessed, based on samples from diverse countries (Indonesia, New Zealand, and the USA) with different political systems. In three studies using a panel of experts (N = 20; Study 1), a convenience sample of adults (N = 212; Study 2), and representative and cross-country samples (N = 897; Study 3), we found that the four-item PSR-R scale provided satisfactory construct validity (i.e. convergent, discriminant, and predictive validity), replicable factor structure with measurement invariance, and predictable results based on socio-political context. The PSR-P scale can be used to advance measurement and applications of parasocial theory in the field of social and political psychology.

Keywords: parasocial theory, parasocial relationships, political figures, measurement invariance, construct validation

Individuals' personal bonding with political figures is regarded as an important feature of political behavior in contemporary democracies (Garzia, 2011, 2013; Lobo & Curtice, 2014; Schneider, 1994). Many political leaders around the world, from Donald Trump in the United States, to Joko Widodo in Indonesia, and Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand, are known to have the ability to mobilise support from a large portion of voters who are attached to them emotionally and personally. Theoretically, such political attachment is unique for several reasons. First, it tends to be little influenced by political ideology, but instead revolves around emotions (Lenz, 2013; Schneider, 1994). Second, bonding with political figures departs from traditional institution-based political attachments, such as party identity or partisanship (Lobo & Curtice, 2014). Third, some scholars observe that the sense of personal bonding with figures entails certain motivational components which may drive ordinary citizens to engage more politically (Dunn & Nisbett, 2014; Gabriel, Paravati, Green, & Flomsbee, 2018).

Existing literatures within the fields of social and political psychology have mostly explained such political dispositions in terms of authoritarian personality or authoritarianism (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Duckitt, 2001), partisanship, political ideology, issue proximity, and congruence of traits and values to the candidates (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Garzia, 2013; Weisberg & Rusk, 1970). Parasocial theory offers an alternative approach in which such political bonding may be viewed as a form of parasocial relationship (PSRs) – that is, an enduring, long-term, and usually positive, one-sided form of relational “intimacy” that may develop toward public figures such as celebrities, sportsmen, and politicians (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006; Stever, 2017). The construct of parasocial relationships with political figures, as J. Cohen and Holbert (2018) asserted, may

extend current models of political behavior by more emphasising its interpersonal rather than ideological or group-based elements.

Despite the important insights promised by parasocial theory, there are critical aspects of its measurement that might hinder the application of the theory in the field of social and political psychology. First of all, existing measures of its key psychological constructs have been criticized conceptually and psychometrically. Since the publication of seminal work by Rubin et al. (A. M. Rubin & Perse, 1987; A. M. Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985) the Parasocial Interaction (PSI) scale has become the most frequently used scale to assess various forms of parasocial relationships, and also has been adopted into political contexts (J. Cohen & Holbert, 2018). However, recent critical reviews of the theory have concerned limitations of the scale and its derivatives. Dibble et al. (2016), for instance, assert that the PSI scale has not been adequately put through construct validation tests, especially using external criteria. Moreover, the scale may have overlooked critical distinctions between two parasocial concepts: parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships (Schramm & Wirth, 2010; these conceptual issues to be discussed). Scales that are designed to specifically measures parasocial relationships are, therefore, needed.

Furthermore, virtually all published parasocial relationships (PSRs) and parasocial interaction (PSI) scales are developed within the context of mass media and popular culture studies, designed to capture parasocial bonding with various media figures or personae such as celebrities, sportsmen, and broadcasters. Given that the domain of politics is somewhat different from the contextual origin of these scales, some of the indicators seem to be qualitatively less relevant to assess people's experiences of being in parasocial relationships with politicians. For instance, Tuchakinsky's (2010) parasocial relationship scale put some emphasis on romantic and

sexual experiences related to the admired celebrities which may not be applicable to politicians in general (also see Slater, Ewoldsen, & Woods, 2018). This limits the content validity of these scales, which as Hinkin (1998) asserts, is one of the critical elements of a psychometrically sound scale.

In addition, existing scales of political parasocial relationships have used 12 and 13 indicators which may not be efficient to measure a single factor (see Dunn & Nisbett, 2014; J. Cohen & Holbert, 2018). On the other hand, psychologists are increasingly interested in brief yet powerful scales to avoid the likeliness of fatigue, boredom and burden for survey participants (Milojev, Osborne, Greaves, Barlow, & Sibley, 2013; Romero, Villar, Gómez-Fraguela, & López-Romero, 2012), which may increase response bias (Hinkin, 1998; Brown, 2014). Scale brevity, as Romero, et al (2012) pointed out, is a priority in many research situations especially in screening studies, large-scale surveys, and repeated measures experiments. The need for brief scales is particularly evident in public opinion surveys in which the questionnaire typically comprises a large set of measures targeting respondents from a general population.

Importantly, political parasocial relationships are also sensitive to the macro political contexts of a country, particularly the type of political system adopted and its degree of democratic maturity. The existing literature suggests that citizens in a presidential system are more susceptible to forming emotional bonds with their politicians (i.e. national leaders) than their counterparts in a parliamentary system (Karvonen, 2007; Lobo & Curtice, 2014). In presidential systems such as the United States and Indonesia, media coverage and voters' attention is routinely focused on Presidential candidates instead of political parties, especially during elections. Conversely, in a parliamentary system like New Zealand, only indirectly do

voters influence the appointment of the prime minister, which thus strengthens the central role of political parties over individual candidates. Furthermore, the degree of democratic maturity (for example, as measured by the Democracy Index; The Economist Intelligent Unit, 2018) might also become an important contextual factor for political parasocial relationships. Unlike in an established democracy, most political parties in an emerging democracy are not well established institutionally, and extensively rely on individual politicians, especially the presidential candidates, to set policy and attract voters (for instance, see Mietzner, 2015). A good measure of political parasocial relationships should thus have the ability to assess parasocial attachments with politicians reliably across countries, and yet produce scores that reflect substantive political differences across the countries examined.

Taking into account the limitations of the existing parasocial relationship scales as discussed above, the present research aims to develop a scale of parasocial relationships with political figures (PSR-P), and test its content validity (Study 1), convergent validity (Study 2), as well as its factor replicability, discriminant validity, and predictive validity (Study 3) using samples from three different countries. The newly developed PSR-P scale is expected to advance the measurement and application of parasocial theory in the field of social and political psychology.

Parasocial Theory

Parasocial theory builds on the assumption that individuals may develop a one-sided or illusionary intimacy at distance with a public figure (or a persona) by viewing her or him through media over time (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Horton & Strauss, 1957). As Horton and Wohl (1956) put it, “They [the viewers] know such a person in somewhat the same way they know their

chosen friends; through direct observation and interpretation of his appearance, his gesture and voice, his conversation and conduct in a variety of situations” (p. 216). Further, the theory posits that the social psychological processes involved in parasocial relationships mirror those in real interpersonal relationships (e.g. friendships) (Horton & Strauss, 1957). Previous research found that people who are in a parasocial relationship regard the figure of intimacy as a source of comfort and enjoyment as well as a role model (Giles, 2002; Gleason, Theran, & Newberg, 2017). They are also motivated to actively nurture the relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956; R. B. Rubin & Mchugh, 1987), and even experience grief and loss when the figure disappears. For example, this sense of loss can occur if the figure dies or withdraws from public life. (E. L. Cohen & Hoffner, 2016; Eyal & Cohen, 2006). Unlike real interpersonal relationships, however, parasocial relationships with public figures like celebrities and political candidates elicit asymmetry, where the fans typically exhibit a strong admiration to the figure, but this is not reciprocated by the public figure equally (Horton & Strauss, 1957; McCutcheon, Lange, & Houran, 2002).

In early developments of parasocial theory, there were ambiguities concerning the conceptualization and measurement of its central concepts of parasocial relationships and parasocial interaction. In their seminal work, Horton and Wohl (1956) put forward the concept of a *parasocial relationship* to describe the long-term one-sided intimacy at distance that a viewer may develop towards media figures or personae. Unfortunately, this term was often used interchangeably with the notion of *parasocial interaction* (PSI) which refers to a simulacrum of conversational give and take with the media figure during media exposures (Horton & Strauss, 1957; Horton & Wohl, 1956). To solve this conceptual problem, A. M. Rubin and colleagues (A. M. Rubin & Perse, 1987; R. B. Rubin & Mchugh, 1987) proposed a broader definition of

parasocial interaction as the viewers' interpersonal involvement with media or public figures, which conceptualizes parasocial interaction and relationships together as a unidimensional construct. This operational definition was used as the conceptual basis for the development of Rubin et al.'s widely adopted Parasocial Interaction (PSI) Scale (A. M. Rubin et al., 1985).

More recently, however, scholars have proposed a clear distinction between parasocial relationships and parasocial interaction (Dibble et al., 2016; Giles, 2002; Klimmt et al., 2006). They argue that, though the two constructs are closely associated, parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships differ theoretically in several meaningful ways. In terms of the nature of the constructs, it is argued that parasocial interaction stands for a media-bounded phenomenon in which the viewers experience a simulacrum of conversational give-and-take as a response to a media figure in specific media exposure situations (Giles, 2002). In contrast, a parasocial relationship refers to a one-sided and positive relationship that extends beyond the media exposure situation (Dibble et al., 2016; Schramm & Wirth, 2010). Importantly, not all parasocial interactions with a media figure translate to parasocial relationships. Such might be the case - for example, when a given figure is disliked by the viewers (Dibble et al., 2016). Considering these distinctions, Hartmann, Schramm, and their colleagues (Klimmt et al., 2006; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008) suggest that a parasocial relationship should be explicitly defined as the enduring and cross-situational feeling of intimacy at distance with a media or public figure. Consequently, alternative measures that are primarily designed to assess PSRs are needed (Schramm & Wirth, 2010), especially in the context of parasocial relationships with political figures.

Existing scales of political parasocial relationship

A variety of parasocial interaction (PSI) scales (A. M. Rubin et al., 1985; A. M. Rubin & Perse, 1987) have been modified and used in previous studies to measure parasocial relationships with political figures and their correlations with various political outcomes. Dunne and Nisbett (2014) modified 12 items from the short version of the PSI scale (A. M. Rubin & Perse, 1987) to assess *parasocial interaction* with political candidates on web pages and social media. Additionally, they selected and modified five items (e.g., “the webpage shows me what this candidate is really like,” “when I viewed the candidate webpage I felt like part of a group,” “I see this candidate as a natural, down to earth person,” “this candidate understands what I need,” and “this candidate understands what I want”) to measure *perceived intimacy* while viewing the candidate’s web page for the reason that the items describe perceptions of a reciprocal relationship

A slightly different approach was taken by Cohen and Holbert (2018), whereby they selected 12 items from the long version (20 items) of the PSI scale (A. M. Rubin et al., 1985) in devising the Political Parasocial Relationship (PPSR) scale to measure the feeling of connection to several political figures including Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Paul Ryan. Interestingly, three items of this PPSR scale were almost identical to those of Dunn and Nisbett’s (2014) measure of perceived intimacy with political candidates during media exposure (i.e. “when I’m watching Donald Trump, I feel as if I am part of his group,” “I see Donald Trump as a natural, down-to-earth person,” “Donald Trump seems to understand the kinds of things I want to know”). Moreover, two items seem to be relevant to the imagery of interactions in a media exposure situation rather than being indicative of enduring feeling of intimacy (e.g. “when

Donald Trump expresses how he feels about the news, it helps me make up my own mind about the media,” “I like to compare my ideas with what Donald Trump says”). These seemingly diverse interpretations of the PSI items might, in fact, stem from Rubin et al.’s broad, albeit conceptually problematic definition of parasocial interaction which also incorporates parasocial relationships (Dibble et al., 2016; Klimmt et al., 2006).

The problem is that neither scale is devised to focus on the enduring feeling of emotional intimacy with a distant other. Given this conceptual lack, an alternative measure designed specifically to measure parasocial relationships with political figures is proposed. We developed an alternative scale of parasocial relationships with political figures (PSR-P) that explicitly measures the enduring feeling of intimacy with a political figure. This scale was devised based on Horton and Wohl’s (1956) original conception of a parasocial relationship and its contemporary refinements by Hartmann and colleagues (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Klimt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). In political contexts, the newly developed PSR-P scale may be utilised as a complement to Schramm and Hartmann’s (2008) 13-item Parasocial Interaction Process Scale (PSI-Process) as modified by Gabriel et al. (2018). This scale was reported to be significantly associated with positive attitudes and trust to the figure, as well as believing in the candidate’s promises and voting for him or her (Gabriel et al., 2018).

To support the utility of the new PSR-P scale, evidence of content validity (Study 1), factor structure, convergent validity, and divergent validity (Study 2), as well as factor replicability, discriminant validity, and predictive validity (Study 3) are reported, using samples from Indonesia, New Zealand, and the U.S.

Study 1: Development and content validity of the PSR-P Scale

In Study 1, we aimed to develop an item list for the PSR-P Scale and content validate these with a panel of experts. In developing the scale, we relied heavily on Horton and Wohl's (1957) and Hartmann, Schramm, & Klimt's (2004) theoretical work to define parasocial relationships with a political figure as *an enduring and cross-situational feeling of intimacy at distance that an ordinary person holds for a political figure*. We used four criteria in generating the items. First, the items should tap into the socio-emotional aspects of parasocial relationships with political figures. Second, the wording of the items should be simple and straightforward so that they can be easily translated into different languages. Third, they should reflect ordinary citizens' experiences of electoral politics. Lastly, we wanted a short PSR-P Scale so that it would be practical to administer in a broad survey measuring a variety of variables, common in electoral research and polling. In so doing, we reviewed the Rubin et al.'s (Rubin et al., 1985; Rubin & Perse, 1987) short and long version of PSI scale items including those that had been adopted for the PPSR scale. Items were translated into Bahasa Indonesian using the committee method (Brislin, 1980), and were then modified to fit our criteria. Additionally, we also conducted field observations and interviews with the supporters of Indonesian president Joko Widodo and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern during their election campaigns, so that we could select indicators able to gauge the precise experiences of being parasocially attached to politicians. We eventually generated seven indicators to be included in the preliminary version of a PSR-P Scale (see Table 2.1). Content validation was then conducted by appointing a panel of experts to judge the quality of the items. The Content Validity Ratio (CVR) for each item was calculated, as suggested by Lawshe (1975).

Method

Participants. Twenty Indonesians (9 females, 11 males; $M_{Age} = 32.5$) were invited to be part of an expert panel to examine the content validity of the initial PSR-P Scale. The panel consisted of four social psychologists, four political psychologists, three psychometricians and two political scientists as the content experts, and seven ordinary citizens as the lay experts. Their participation was on a strictly voluntary basis, and no incentives for participation were provided.

Procedure. Experts received a link to the online validation form of the preliminary PSR-P Scale. Following Lawshe's (1975) content validation method, they were first requested to review the operational definition of the construct. Then they were asked to group the seven items into one of three categories: "essential," "useful, but not essential," or "not necessary." The Content Validity Ratio (CVR) for each item was calculated to determine the level of expert agreement using the formula: $CVR = (N_e - N/2)/(N/2)$, where N_e is the number of experts rating "essential," and N is the total number of experts. Given that we had 20 members on the panel, 0.42 of the CVR value was set as the cut-off point following Lawshe (1975). Only items with a CVR value greater than 0.42 were included for further validation.

Results

The content validation of preliminary PSR-P items produced CVR values that ranged from mediocre (-0.5) to excellent (0.9). As can be seen in Table 2.1, Item No 7 failed to achieve the cut-off point, so it was discarded from the item list. Subsequent construct validations of the PSR-P Scale were conducted based on the remaining six items.

Table 2. 1. The CVR values of the preliminary PSR-P items

No.	Item list	N	Ne	CVR
1	I am very sympathetic to what he or she wants to achieve.	20	19	.9
2	I find his or her life story to be inspiring.	20	15	.5
3	I would love to have dinner with him or her.	20	15	.5
4	I am moved by his or her speeches.	20	20	1
5	The criticism that is directed at him or her makes me feel angry.	20	20	1
6	I don't care about how much political party support he or she has.	20	17	.7
7	I think she or he is like an old friend.	20	5	-.5*

Note: *discarded

Study 2: Factor structure and convergent validity

The PSR-P Scale was explicitly designed to measure a single latent factor of parasocial relationship with a political figure. To ensure that the 6 items of the PSR-P scale from Study 1 loaded onto the expected single factor, an exploratory factor analysis using Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) extraction and Varimax rotation was performed. Items that had a factor loading lower than 0.40 were excluded from the item list in order to maximise the interpretability of the latent factor (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). A confirmatory factor analysis with MLR estimator (50,000 iterations) was used to test the factor structure of the final PSR-P Scale (Muthén & Muthén, 2006). This included five cutoff criteria to check for the model good of fitness: non-significant chi-square (χ^2), RMSEA < .06, SRMSR < .08, CFI > .95 and TLI > .95 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Furthermore, a series of convergent validation tests were conducted using a nomological network approach (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955), in which the PSR-P scale was expected to produce specific patterns of correlation with the PPSR and PSI-Process scales. To assess the strength of the correlations (r), we used Cohen's (1988, pp. 83) criteria in which $r =$

.10, .30, and .50 are considered as small, medium, and large respectively. To support the convergent validity of the scale, we expected PSR-P to show a high correlation ($>.50$) with PPSR, given that these scales were designed to measure the same construct (**Hypothesis 1**). Conversely, a medium correlation between the PSR-P and PSI-Process was expected (**Hypothesis 2**), considering that the latter was devised to exclusively measure parasocial interactions (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008).

Method

Participants. Two hundred and twelve adult participants were recruited in Indonesia through online snowballing (62.9% female; $M_{Age} = 25.58$, $SD_{Age} = 7.8$). Participants were required to be 18 years old or older, and eligible to participate in the 2019 Indonesian General Election. Their participation in this study was on a voluntary basis.

Measures and procedures. Participants who agreed with the statement of informed consent were directed to an online questionnaire consisting of the preliminary PSR-P, PPSR Scale, PSI-Process Scale, and demographic information. In administering the questionnaire, we followed the standard procedure of measuring parasocial relationships (Rubin et al., 1985), by which participants were first asked to nominate their most favoured political figure on the national stage (see Appendix for the list of political figures from Study 2). Subsequently, they were asked to respond to the item list of the preliminary PSR-P (6 items), PPSR (12 items), and PSI-Process (13 items) with reference to the nominated figure. Sample items of PPSR included: “when [the figure] expresses how he feels about the news, it helps me make up my own mind about the media”, (1 = *disagree completely* to 7 = *agree completely*). In addition, participants were asked to think about the figure during media exposure when responding to the PSI-Process

items (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). Sample items of PSI-Process included “Sometimes I felt like speaking out on [the figure]”, (1 = *disagree completely* to 7 = *agree completely*). Both PSI and PSI-Process Scale provided decent internal consistency (0.887 and 0.849 respectively; see Table 2.3. for descriptive statistics).

Results

Table 2. 2. Factor loadings of the preliminary and final items of the PSR-P scale

No.	Items	Step 1: EFA		Step 2: CFA
		Factor 1	Factor 2	
1	I am very sympathetic to what he or she wants to achieve.	0.684	0.213	0.717
2	I find his or her life story to be inspiring.	0.649	-	0.636
3	I would love to have dinner with him or her.	0.489	-	0.487
4	I am moved by his or her speeches.	0.615	0.161	0.634
5	The criticism that is directed at him or her makes me feel angry.	-	0.364*	-
6	I don't care about how much political party support he or she has.	-	0.629*	-
Initial eigenvalues		38	19	54

Note: *discarded

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (0.741) and Bartlett's sphericity tests [$\chi^2(15) = 175.534$, $p < .001$] showed the data was adequate to perform Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) on the six preliminary PSR-P items (Kaiser & Rice, 1974). We ran EFA using Principal Axis Factoring (PFA) with Varimax rotation and found that four items were highly loaded onto a conceptually coherent factor (Factor 1), while the remaining two items loaded onto a second, less interpretable factor (Item No 5 and 6; see Table 2.2). These two items were thus excluded from the final PSR-P scale.

Next, the retained 4 items were subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis with a MLR estimator (50,000 iterations): this showed that a single latent factor model produced

satisfying fit indices, $\chi^2(2) = 1.286, p = .526, RMSEA = .000, CFI = 1, TLI = 1.022, SRMR = .013$, and decent internal consistency, $\alpha = .707$. In contrast, we found excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .894$) but insufficient model fit for the PPSR scale¹, $\chi^2(2) = 20.39, p = .000, RMSEA = .208, CFI = .952, TLI = .856, SRMR = .032$, and good internal consistency ($\alpha = .849$) and good model fit for the PSI-Process scale, $\chi^2(2) = 1.087, p = .581, RMSEA = .000, CFI = 1, TLI = 1.012, SRMR = .014$ (see Table 2.3).

Table 2. 3. Descriptive statistics, Cronbach’s alpha, model fit indices and Pearson’s correlation coefficients of the PSR-P, PPSR, and PSI-Process

Measures	Mean	SD	<i>A</i>	Model fit indices							Pearson’s <i>r</i>	
				χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR	PPSR	PSI-Process
PSR-P	5.88	.765	.707	1.286	2	.526	.000	1.00	1.022	.013	.600**	.451**
PPSR	5.10	.901	.894	20.39 [†]	2	.000	.208	.952	.856	.032	-	.798**
PSI-Process	4.24	.881	.849	1.087 [†]	2	.581	.000	1.00	1.012	.014	-	1.00

Note: [†]based on parcelled items; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

We then proceeded by testing the convergent validity of the final PSR-P scale using PPSR and PSI-Process as the criterion variables. As displayed in Table 2.3, PSR-P was highly and positively correlated with PPSR, $r = .600, p < .001$, confirming Hypothesis 1. We also found a smaller, moderate correlation between PSR-P and PSI-Process in accord with Hypothesis 2, $r = .451, p < .001$. Taken together, these analyses provided initial evidence for the convergent validity of the PSR-P scale.

Study 3: Replicability, discriminant validity and predictive validity

To demonstrate the replicability, validity and functionality of the PSR-P scale, the items and the factor that represents a parasocial relationship with a political figure should

¹ Tested based on parceled items following J. Cohen and Holbert (2018).

produce measurement invariance with samples across socio-political contexts; it should be distinguished from other relevant concepts and afford predictable relationships with criterial dependent measures (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). For the present study, we selected samples from three countries to test the measurement invariance of the PSR-P scale. Indonesia was chosen because it is an emerging democracy that has adopted a presidential system. The United States and New Zealand were to represent established democracies that have adopted presidential and parliamentary systems respectively (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2018). A large body of literature suggests that a presidential system, where the political dynamics are centred around political figures rather than parties, facilitates candidate-focused political preferences more than a parliamentary system (Karvonen, 2007; Lobo & Curtice, 2014). This might even be more prevalent in the presidential system of an emerging democracy like Indonesia, whose political parties are neither established institutionally nor based on any systematic political ideology (Mietzner, 2015).

It is expected that the PSR-P scale has the ability to equally and reliably detect parasocial relationships with political figures of citizens across political contexts (**Hypothesis 3**).

Furthermore, it was expected that mean PSR-P scales would reflect differences in political systems and democratic maturity across Indonesia, New Zealand, and the USA (**Hypothesis 4**).

PSR-P should be higher in the USA and Indonesia than New Zealand, and higher in Indonesia than the USA.

Furthermore, if the PSR-P scale is to demonstrate discriminant validity, this scale is expected to be not highly correlated with other scales designed to assess theoretically different constructs (Campbell & Fiske, 1956). Given its unique emphasize on the sense of distant

intimacy, the PSR-P scale should demonstrate that political parasocial relationship is distinguishable from other constructs that capture different psycho-political experiences. Specifically, to demonstrate its discriminant validity, a parasocial relationship with a politician should not be strongly and consistently related to other forms of political attachment based on the need for submission to a strong leader (i.e. authoritarianism; Duckitt, 2001), political ideology (Schneider, 1994), and the moral obligation to follow benevolent and morally legitimate political leaders (i.e. belief in benevolent authority; Liu, Yeh, Wu, Liu, & Yang, 2015) across socio-political contexts (**Hypothesis 5**).

Finally, just as in traditional interpersonal relationships, parasocial relationships are theorized to motivate one to nurture involvement with the figure of intimacy (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Previous studies in the US have found that people who maintain a parasocial relationship with a political figure are more likely to have a higher interest in politics and show greater elaboration of political information, which subsequently enhances their internal efficacy in political participation (Dunn & Nisbett, 2014). Thus, as the criteria for predictive validity, we hypothesised that PSR-P should predict political interest, political elaboration and political efficacy consistently across political contexts (**Hypothesis 6**).

Method

Participants. This study initially involved 1,399 adult participants (≥ 18 years old) from Indonesia (N = 305), New Zealand (N= 605), and the U.S. (N= 489). Participants were recruited online through a stratified quota sample recruited by Nielsen (stratified according to age, gender and region), a global media polling company on the researchers' behalf. Five hundred and two participants (35.9%) did not mention any specific favoured political figure and

were excluded from the present analysis. This exclusion was taken to ensure that the participants had a target figure in mind when responding to the PSR-P scale, thus reducing measurement error (Kerlinger, 1986; R. B. Rubin & Mchugh, 1987). Our final samples included 897 participants, consisting of 206 Indonesians (55.3% female, $M_{Age} = 37.74$, $SD_{Age} = 9.55$), 366 New Zealanders (54.7% female, $M_{Age} = 53.53$, $SD_{Age} = 15.74$), and 329 Americans (56% female, $M_{Age} = 55.69$, $SD_{Age} = 14$). All participants agreed with informed consent before completing the questionnaire.

Measures. We first asked the participants to nominate their most favoured national political figure (see Table 2.5 for the list of the most favored political figures). The four items of the PSR-P Scale from Study 2 were then used to measure participants' sense of relationship intimacy with their favoured political figure. These items consistently showed good internal consistency across sample groups (Indonesia = 0.879; New Zealand = 0.846; the U.S. = 0.847; see Table 2.4). The questionnaire also included three variables as the criteria for discriminant validity: right-wing authoritarianism, benevolent authority, and political ideology. There were also three criterion variables for predictive validity: political interest, political elaboration, and political efficacy.

Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). This variable was measured with a modified 4-item RWA scale drawing on items developed by Duckitt (2001). The scale included items like "Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn", (1 = *disagree completely* to 7 = *agree completely*). The internal consistency of this scale was decent for New Zealand (0.728) and the U.S. (0.766), but quite low for Indonesia (0.414).

Benevolent authority. This construct was measured with a four-item scale developed by Liu et al. (2015) that captured beliefs in the benevolence and moral legitimacy of leaders in central government. This scale included items such as “The leaders in our country set a good example for young people to follow” (1 = *disagree completely* to 7 = *agree completely*). This scale provided good internal consistency across sample groups (Indonesia = 0.780; New Zealand = 0.849; the U.S. = 0.794).

Political ideology. This was measured with three items modified from the European Social Survey (ESS), tapping into one’s orientations on political, economic, and social issues in term of liberal-conservative ideology. The sample items included “On political issues, where would you place yourself on a scale of 0-10, where 10 = Strong conservative and 0 = Strong liberal”. This scale showed very good internal consistency for each sample group (Indonesia = 0.917; New Zealand = 0.938; the U.S. = 0.959).

Political interest. This was measured with a single item derived from the World Values Survey asking, “How interested are you in information about what’s going on in politics and public affairs?” (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *a great deal*). This scale has been well validated in almost 100 countries, including Indonesia, New Zealand, and the U.S. (Inglehart et al., 2014).

Political elaboration. Political elaboration referred to the extent to which people elaborate on political discussions and conversations they have been engaged in (Eveland, 2004), and was assessed with a four-item scale which included statements, such as “I often find myself thinking about my conversations with other people about politics and public affairs after the discussion has ended,” (1 = *disagree completely* to 7 = *agree completely*). This scale showed

very good internal consistency across the sample groups (Indonesia = 0.925; New Zealand = 0.908; the U.S. = 0.914).

Internal political efficacy. Internal political efficacy was defined as beliefs about one's own competence to understand, and to participate effectively in politics, was measured with a four-item Internal Political Efficacy Scale drawn from the National Election Survey (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991). The scale included items, such as “I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics” (1 = *disagree completely* to 7 = *agree completely*). This scale provided good internal consistency for New Zealand (0.760) and the U.S. (0.761) but was less than acceptable for Indonesia (0.400).

For the Indonesian sample group, all criterion measures were translated into Bahasa Indonesia using the committee method (Brislin, 1980).

Results

To test the replicability of the PSR-P factor structure across countries (Hypothesis 3), we first performed a confirmatory factor analysis with MLR estimator (50,000 iterations) for individual sample groups (Muthén & Muthén, 2006). As expected, the single latent factor model of the PSR-P consistently produced very good model fit for Indonesia ($\chi^2(2) = 2.241, p = .326$; RMSEA = 0.024, CFI = 0.998, TLI = 0.995, SRMR = 0.015), New Zealand ($\chi^2(2) = 6.215, p = 0.045$; RMSEA = 0.076, CFI = 0.988, TLI = 0.963, SRMR = 0.017), and the U.S. ($\chi^2(2) = 4.321, p = 0.115$; RMSEA = 0.060, CFI = 0.992, TLI = 0.976, SRMR = 0.016).

Next, we performed invariance measurement tests to assess whether the factor structure of the PSR-P scale and the meaning of the items were equal across sample groups.

Measurement invariance was examined using the Satorra-Bentler chi-square ($SB-\chi^2$) difference test with scaling correction (Satorra & Bentler, 2011). Our analysis revealed that the configural model [$\chi^2(6) = 11.525, p = 0.073$; RMSEA = 0.055, CFI = 0.992, TLI = 0.977, SRMR = 0.016], metric model [$\chi^2(12) = 18.399, p = 0.104$; RMSEA = 0.042, CFI = 0.991, TLI = 0.987, SRMR = 0.058], and scalar model of the PSR-P scale [$\chi^2(18) = 33.833, p = 0.013$; RMSEA = 0.054, CFI = 0.978, TLI = 0.978, SRMR = 0.076] produced good model fits. More importantly, the model yielded full metric [$SB-\chi^2(\Delta df = 6) = 5.954, p = 0.428$] and scalar invariance [$SB-\chi^2(\Delta df = 6) = 16.548, p = 0.011$] across sample groups. In summary, these results supported Hypothesis 3 in that the factor structure of PSR-P was replicable, and the meaning ascribed to the items were invariant across selected sample groups.

Given measurement invariance for the PSR-P scale, we further tested the mean difference of parasocial relationships with politicians across countries. As shown in Figure 1, we found a significant mean difference of the PSR-P scale between sample groups, $F(2) = 45.79, p < 0.001, f = 0.346$. More specifically, the mean score of the Indonesian sample was significantly higher than both the US ($\Delta\bar{x} = 0.240, SE = 0.102, 95\% CI [0.041 \quad 0.44], f = 0.086$) and New Zealand samples ($\Delta\bar{x} = 0.856, SE = 0.993, 95\% CI [0.670 \quad 1.06], f = 0.375$). On the other hand, the US participants showed a significantly higher score on political parasocial relationships than their New Zealand counterparts, $\Delta\bar{x} = 0.625, SE = 0.087, 95\% CI [0.454 \quad 0.795], f = 0.260$. Supporting Hypothesis 4, these results demonstrate that the type of political system and the democratic maturity of a country are important contextual factors for parasocial relationships with politicians.

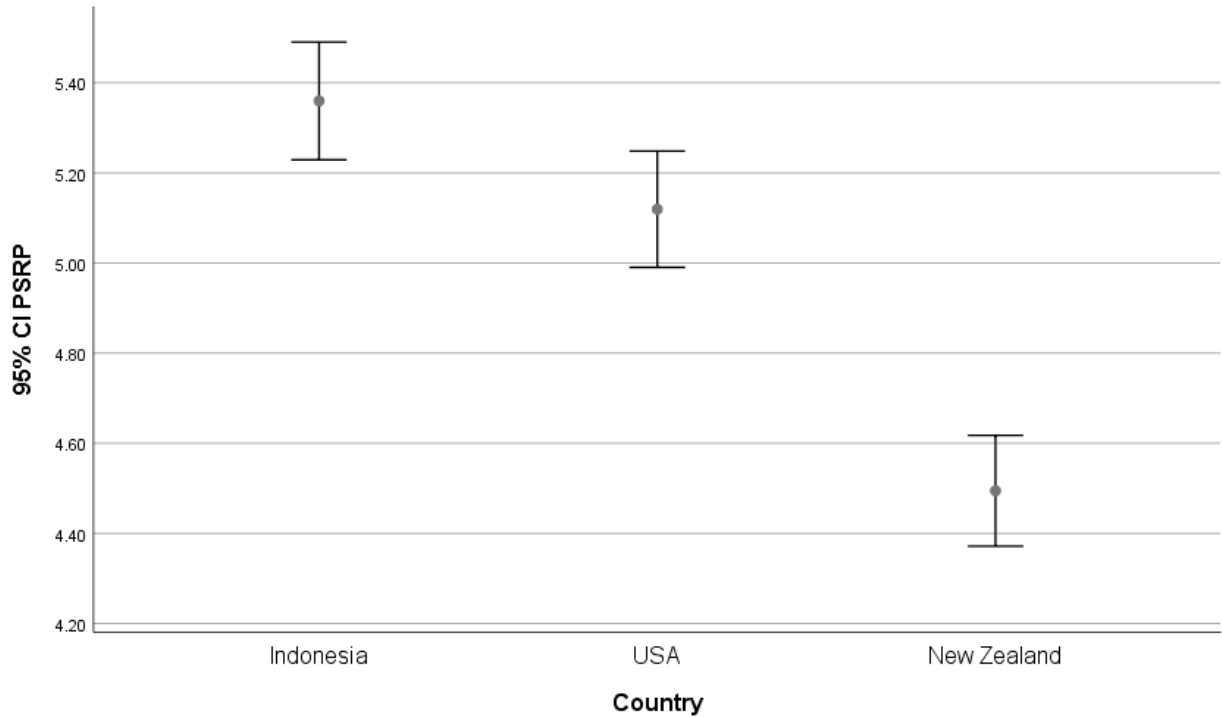


Figure 2.1. The mean score differences of the PSR-P scale across sample groups

In terms of discriminant validity, we found non-significant correlations between PSR-P and RWA for both New Zealand ($r = -0.021, p > 0.05$) and the U.S. sample groups ($r = -0.098, p > 0.05$). This correlation, however, was small for the Indonesian samples ($r = 0.148, p < 0.05$) based on Cohen's criteria (1998). In addition, we found non-significant correlations of PSR-P and Benevolent Authority for the Indonesian ($r = 0.039, p > 0.05$) and the U.S. ($r = 0.073, p > 0.05$) sample groups, and a small yet significant correlation for the New Zealand sample ($r = 0.153, p < 0.01$). These findings confirmed that PSR-P was distinct from various forms of authoritarianism. Moreover, the relationships between PSR-P and Political Ideology were mixed yet consistently weak across sample groups. The correlation was weak and positive for the Indonesians ($r = 0.148, p < 0.05$), non-significant for the New Zealanders ($r = -0.02, p > 0.05$), weak and negative for the U.S. participants ($r = -0.138, p < 0.05$). In summary, based on these inconsistent and weak correlations between parasocial relationship and authoritarianism,

benevolent authority, and political ideology across sample groups, we concluded that the PSR-P scale had discriminant validity with these concepts, supporting Hypothesis 5 (see Table 2.4).

Table 2. 4. Descriptive statistics, Cronbach’s alpha, and the correlation coefficients of the PSR-P and discriminant and predictive validity criterion variables.

Variables	Indonesia				New Zealand				US			
	Mean	SD	<i>A</i>	<i>R</i>	Mean	SD	<i>a</i>	<i>R</i>	Mean	SD	<i>a</i>	<i>r</i>
PSR-P	5.36	0.95	.879	1	4.49	1.20	.846	1	5.12	1.18	.847	1
Discriminant validity:												
(1). Right-wing authoritarianism	5.37	0.78	.414	.146*	4.51	1.23	.728	-0.021	4.42	1.35	.766	-0.098
(2). Benevolent authority	3.50	1.28	.780	0.039	3.92	1.33	.849	.153**	3.03	1.21	.794	0.073
(3). Political Ideology	6.44	2.17	.917	.148*	5.11	2.13	.938	-0.02	5.54	3.01	.959	-.138*
Predictive validity:												
(4). Political elaboration	4.06	1.33	.925	.257**	3.81	1.49	.908	.221**	3.85	1.58	.914	.194**
(5). Political interest	4.5	1.4	<i>n. a.</i>	.329**	4.60	1.51	<i>n. a.</i>	.353**	5.19	1.52	<i>n. a.</i>	.364**
(6). Political efficacy	4.02	0.98	.400	.020	4.10	1.25	.760	.221**	4.26	1.34	.761	.248**

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

As for predictive validity, we found significant and consistent correlations between PSR-P and two of the criterion variables across countries: political elaboration (Indonesia, $r = 0.257$, $p < 0.01$; New Zealand, $r = 0.221$, $p < 0.01$; the U.S., $r = 0.194$, $p < 0.01$), and political interest (Indonesia, $r = 0.334$, $p < 0.01$; New Zealand, $r = 0.345$, $p < 0.01$; the U.S., $r = 0.382$, $p < 0.01$). Meanwhile, significant and positive correlations between PSR-P and internal political efficacy were found for New Zealand ($r = 0.220$, $p < 0.01$) and the US ($r = 0.262$, $p < 0.01$), but not for Indonesia ($r = 0.242$, $p < 0.01$). Again, these results supported Hypothesis 6 in that PSR-P was able to produce adequate predictive validity across sample groups.

General discussion

Our aim in this study was to develop a scale to measure ordinary people's feeling of distant intimacy (or, parasocial relationship) with political figures. We found that the four items of PSR-P scale developed had sufficient psychometric properties to measure a parasocial relationship with a political figure as an individual difference. PSR-P exhibited convergent validity ($r=.60$) compared with the PPSR scale which was designed to measure parasocial *relationships* with political figures (but does not distinguish this from parasocial interaction). Moreover, PSR-P also demonstrated convergent validity by producing a more moderate correlation with the PSI-Process scale ($r=.45$) that was designed to measure parasocial *interaction*. In contrast, the PPSR scale showed a high correlation with PSI-Process and produced insufficient model fit, implying that there might be some difficulties related to the construct validity of the scale. Lastly, the PSR-P scale also provided evidence of factor replicability, discriminant validity, and predictive validity based on samples from socio-politically diverse countries, such as Indonesia, New Zealand, and the US.

The construct of parasocial relationship as measured by the PSR-P implies that interpersonal processes are involved in the relationship between voters and candidates. Instead of relying solely on the candidates' ideology and authority, some individuals utilised an interpersonal framework in the understanding and formation of their political orientation towards their preferred political figure. As shown in the current study, such interpersonal-based political dispositions exhibited weak and inconsistent correlations with political ideology, right-wing authoritarianism, and benevolent authority across socio-political contexts. Parasocial theory suggests that individuals who form parasocial relationships with a distant figure like a political candidate are more likely to see the figure as though she or he was a higher status acquaintance –

in other words, as an asymmetrical relationship (R. B. Rubin & Mchugh, 1987). For these individuals – approximately 64% of nationally representative samples from three countries – the nominated political figure is theorised to serve as a source of comfort, enjoyment, and a role model (Giles, 2002) to simplify their understanding of national politics. The PSR-P scale allows researchers to empirically investigate further such propositions across countries with a psychometrically robust measure of political parasocial relationship.

Another important finding related to the linkage between two key concepts in parasocial theory, parasocial interaction and parasocial relationship. Horton and Wohl (1956) initially asserted that one's parasocial relationship with a distant figure develops as she or he frequently encounters the given figure through mass media over time. Elaborating the theory further, Hartmann and colleagues (Dibble et al., 2016; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Klimmt et al., 2006; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008) pointed out that the feeling of distant intimacy with a particular figure (i.e., parasocial relationship) may evolve from one's repeated experience of conversational take and give with the given figure through media – that is, parasocial interaction – even though this might not be the only path. Our findings supported such notions by showing a positive, moderate, and significant correlation between parasocial interactions (as measured with the PSI-Process scale) and parasocial relationships with political figures (as measured with the PSR-P scale).

Furthermore, central to parasocial theory is the idea that some people are motivated to nurture parasocial relationships, just like real interpersonal relationships. The theory posits that individuals who are in a parasocial relationship with a particular figure are more likely to find out more about the given figure's private and social life (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and learn

vicariously from the figure's experiences (Dunn & Nisbett, 2014). Indicative of such tendencies, our analysis revealed that parasocial relationships with political figures had consistently significant and positive associations with a higher interest in politics, greater elaboration of political information, and higher internal political efficacy across sample groups. These results were consistent with previous findings from Dunn and Nisbett's (2004) study, and also showed that such patterns could be found across socio-political settings.

It is important to note that the type of political system and the maturity of democracy in a country appear to have a pivotal contextual role for forming parasocial relationships with politicians. We found that the intensity of parasocial attachments with politicians was significantly higher in presidential systems (Indonesia and the US) than in a parliamentary system (New Zealand). Additionally, the democratically emerging presidential system of Indonesia was found to show significantly higher intensity of political parasocial relationships than the more established presidential system of the USA. These findings imply that both the type of political system and its democratic maturity should be taken into account as a critical macro-level factor in future research on parasocial relationships with politicians in cross-national contexts.

Despite the findings, there are limitations to the present study. First, the exploratory and confirmatory analyses in Study 2 were conducted based on a convenience adult sample. While the sample size was arguably sufficient to perform both EFA and CFA as indicated by the sample adequacy tests, the use of convenience samples might limit the generalisability of the scale assessment. This issue, however, was well addressed in Study 3, with the replications of the PSR-P measurement model using more representative and cross-cultural sample groups. Second,

the use of an open-ended question as the opening part of the scale (i.e., please indicate, who is your most favoured political figure at the national stage?) reduced the sample size in Study 3. The fact that some individuals were not able to bring any specific figures in their mind when completing the scale suggests that not all individuals (35.9% in this study) are equally prone to form parasocial relationships with political figures. Nonetheless, we considered this approach appropriate for the initial assessment of the scale in order to reduce measurement errors as suggested by R. B. Rubin and McHugh (1987). However, we suggest that future studies may set specific political figures (e.g., presidential candidates, prominent Congress members, and so forth) as the target of parasocial relationship evaluation to further expand the generalizeability of the PSR-P.

In conclusion, the PSR-P scale provided robust psychometric properties to measure parasocial relationships with politicians. Theoretically, the scale can be utilised to advance the application of parasocial theory as an explanatory framework of political behaviors across countries. In terms of the practical utility, the PSR-P scale may be useful in public opinion or electoral surveys to assess the intensity of the voters' parasocial attachments cultivated by particular candidates. We believe that parasocial theory offers important insights into the field of political psychology and is particularly relevant amid the trends in many democratic countries where the electoral politics are increasingly centred around political figures and their usage of social media platforms.

Table 2. 5. List of the most favored political figures from Study 2 and Study 3

Study 2		Study 3					
Indonesia		Indonesia		New Zealand		US	
Political figures	Freq	Political figures	Freq	Political figures	Freq	Political figures	Freq
Joko Widodo	65	Basuki Tjahaja Purnama	55	John Key	140	Donald Trump	60
Basuki Tjahaja Purnama	28	Joko Widodo	46	Winston Peters	98	Bernie Sanders	55
Ridwan Kamil	21	Ridwan Kamil	18	Andrew Little	21	Hilary Clinton	48
Anies Baswedan	17	Prabowo Subianto	17	Jacinda Ardern	17	Ted Cruz	33
Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie	13	Soeharto	15	Meteria Turei	17	Barack Obama	32
Mahfud MD	13	Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie	11	Paula Bennet	11	John Kasich	20
Prabowo Subianto	13	Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono	7	Bill English	7	Paul Ryan	14
Susi Pudjiastuti	5	Tri Rismaharini	5	David Seymore	6	Elizabeth Warren	13
Amien Rais	4	Mahfud MD	4	Peter Dunne	5	Ben Carson	9
Sri Mulyani	4	Abdurrahman Wahid	3	Phil Goff	5	Marco Rubio	8
Anis Matta	3	Hidayat Nur Wahid	3	Judith Collins	4	Bill Clinton	5
Tri Rismaharini	3	Surya Paloh	3	Annette King	3	Carly Fiorina	4
Fahri Hamzah	2	Ahmad Heriyawan	2	Grant Robertson	3	Joe Biden	3
Ganjar Pranowo	2	Amien Rais	2	James Shaw	3	Condoleeza Rice	2
Sandiaga Uno	2	Ki Hajar Dewantara	2	Amy Adams	2	Jeb Bush	2
Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono	2	Megawati Sukarno Putri	2	David Shearer	2	Joe Manchin	2
Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono	1	Moh Hatta	2	Jan Logie	2	John McCain	2
Airlangga Hartarto	1	Soekarno	2	Kelvin Davis	2	Amy Klobuchar	1
Akbar Faisal	1	Susi Pujiastuti	2	Nathan Guy	2	Chris Christie	1
Dinopatti Djalal	1	Ganjar Pranowo	1	Maggie Barry	2	Collin Peterson	1
Eko Sriyanto Galgendu	1	Retno Marsudi	1	Steven Joyce	2	Corey Booker	1
Emil Dardak	1	Ruhut Sitompul	1	Stuart Nash	2	Gary Johnson	1
Hatta Rajasa	1	Sandiaga Uno	1	Bob Parker	2	J.F. Kennedy	1
Jusuf Kalla	1	Sri Sultan Hamengkubuwono IX	1	Colin Craig	1	Jeff Flake	1
Khofifah Indar Parawansa	1			David Clark	1	Kamala Harris	1
Retno Marsudi	1			Helen Clarke	1	Michael Bloomberg	1
Rizal Ramli	1			Hone Harawera	1	Mike Amyx	1
Rocky Gerung	1			Iain Lees-Galloway	1	Mike Coffman	1
Salim Segaf Al-Jufri	1			Julian Crawford	1	Steve Scalise	1
Soekarno	1			Megan Woods	1	Tulsi Gabbard	1
Tuan Guru Bajang	1						

Chapter 3: From news engagement to parasocial relationships with political candidates: Explaining the social psychological process and implications in the context of the US Presidential Election

Abstract

The focus of news coverage in western countries has been argued to have shifted from political parties and policy issues towards more personal aspects of political actors (personalized news coverage). Such personalized news was theorized as a key factor that drives voters' attention to the individual candidates and invokes a sense of intimacy with them. Interestingly, existing evidence suggested that the increasing importance of individual political actors in people's political considerations was not necessarily associated with the actual count of the number of personalized news items over the years. To address these puzzling findings, the present study argued and provided a mediation model showing that, it is the social psychology of the voters in processing the news that transforms news engagement to the development of imaginary social interactions and a sense of intimacy with political candidates (conceptualized as parasocial relationships). Based on a US adult sample (N = 837), this study showed that such parasocial relationships with political candidates were strongly correlated with support for the candidates' policy positions as well as voting intentions for them. The hypotheses tested in the present study were all preregistered. The results were discussed in light of the ongoing debates on candidate-centered politics, with some emphasis on the upcoming 2020 US Presidential Election.

Keywords: news engagement, imaginary social interactions, parasocial relationships, political attitudes, voting intentions

Amid the growing complexity of politics in many democracies, political figures are becoming central factors in voters' political considerations. For instance, analyzing the time-series data across Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and UK, Garzia (2011, 2013) found that, over the years, voters' support for a party has become increasingly contingent upon their perception of the party leader instead of vice versa. Moreover, Lenz (2013) provides correlational and experimental evidence that US citizens tend to follow the policy positions of a candidate they already liked rather than critically evaluate and support the given candidate based on their own

political stances. Previous scholars have explained that voters' tendency to focus on and become emotionally attached to political figures is, in part, a function of the personalized contents of political news. It is thought that the focus of the contemporary news coverage in western countries has increasingly shifted from parties and policies to individual political actors, portrayed as 'ordinary' persons with personal characteristics, a life style, family life, hobbies, and so forth allowing people to have a feeling of personal intimacy with them (Adam & Maier, 2010; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). However, this appears to be an incomplete account of the personalization of politics, because in countries with recorded voting trends toward candidate-centered politics, like Germany and UK (Garzia, 2013), the objective count of number of personalized news items has remained relatively steady, or mixed at best (Holtz-Bacha, Langer, & Merkle, 2014; Karvonen, 2010; Kriesi, 2012), even though the impression is that person centered politics is coming more prevalent.

Pushing beyond actual news content, the present study attempts to shift the focus to the social psychology of the voters in processing the news; I content that it is people's subjective processes which transform engagement with the news to the development of imagined intimacy with political actors. The literature in social psychology suggests that the narrative elements of news stories can stimulate imaginary social interactions with the political actors described within, which can lead to a feeling of intimacy with them, conceptualized as a parasocial relationship (Gabriel, Valenti, & Young, 2016; Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956). The literature also indicates that such a political relationship, although more symbolic and imagined than real and reciprocal, is potent and powerful, in its implications for political behavior (J. Cohen & Holbert, 2018; Gabriel, Paravati, Green, & Flomsbee, 2018). To investigate these possibilities, I first review the literature on the social psychology of narratives, and then

empirically examine the extent to which engaging with political news may facilitate imaginary social interactions and the formation of parasocial relationships. Furthermore, the potential implications of parasocial relationships on individuals' political attitudes and choices will also be assessed by taking into account individual differences in information processing (i.e. the need for cognition; Caccioppo & Petty, 1982). The results of the present research will be discussed in light of the ongoing debates on candidate-focused politics (Wattenberg, 1991), with some emphasizes on candidate preferences and voting intentions for the upcoming 2020 US Presidential Election.

Imaginary social interaction

Citizens in a democratic society often engage with political news on a regular basis through various media. It is widely believed that engaging with news is pivotal to democracy as it helps citizens keep up with current political events and informs their political attitudes and choices (Habermas, 2006). However, the literature in social psychology suggests that engaging in narratives such reading, listening, and watching political news offers more than merely informational benefits. In the present study, I use Prince's (2012) definition of narratives as the representation of at least two real or fictive events in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other. It has been argued that narratives, including in this case political news, have a certain immersive quality (Gerrig, 2018). Like any other form of narrative, news has immersive story elements that can pull their audiences into symbolic social worlds (Gabriel et al., 2016). Specifically, the immersive quality of political news may emanate from its detailed description of places, social situations, events, political actors, and the interactions and conflicts among them that invoke the individuals' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses (e.g.

feeling empathy to a political actor, imagining themselves as part of an on-going political situation).

Engaging with the symbolic world of narratives allows individuals to imagine themselves as being involved in social interactions with the characters presented in the news (Gabriel et al., 2016; Gerrig, 2018). Such interactions are conceptualized as imaginary because they are one-sided: a person may feel a strong presence from a political figure when watching news on TV, but it is not reasonable to expect this figure to be aware of all of his or her supporters reciprocally (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Nevertheless, Horton and Wohl (1956) argued that the imaginary interactions, or what they termed parasocial interaction, share substantial similarities with social interactions in the real world. Indeed, recent evidence suggests that imaginary social interactions in narratively constructed worlds can invoke a potent and powerful interpersonal process similar to real-life social interactions (see Gabriel, et al., 2016 for a review). For instance, Oatley (1999) found that engaging in narratives leads to an increase in thoughts and emotions congruent with the one presented in the narrative. More importantly, Oatley and colleagues (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 2016) also provide experimental evidence that people can develop empathy toward characters in the narratives as they do with real persons. Hence, the literature suggests that when engaging with political news, people may not only acquire information about public affairs and political events, but also engage in imaginary social interactions with political actors.

Imaginary interactions with political actors in the narrative worlds, if continuously repeated, can transform into more enduring parasocial relationships. Horton and Wohl (1956) defined a parasocial relationship as one-sided and positive intimacy at a distance that people feel towards media figures (personae) after the media exposure situations. It is thought that frequent

imaginary interactions in the narrative worlds provided by mass media give opportunities for people to get more familiar with public figures, including an imagined intimacy with their thoughts, personal characteristics and habits. This enables the individual to anticipate how the actors would react in certain situations and develop empathy with them (Gabriel et al., 2016), and hence form parasocial relationships.

The implications of parasocial relationships

The literature suggests that being in a parasocial relationship can influence many aspects of individuals' social behaviors. Importantly, Gabriel, et al (2016) point out that, just like in real interpersonal relationships, being in parasocial relationships with public figures involves the merging of one's self with the attributes of the admired figure(s). Consequently, those who hold a strong parasocial bond with a public figure are more likely to imitate the figure's attitudes and acts (Bond & Drogos, 2014; Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003; Brown & De Matviuk, 2010), and be involved in activities that promote the status or live up the legacy of this figure (Bae, Brown, & Kang, 2010; E. L. Cohen & Hoffner, 2016). Furthermore, people may acquire the benefits to their self-esteem from such symbolic relationships with high-status figures (Derrick, Gabriel, & Tippin, 2008). In a similar vein, the literature in political science suggests that attachments to political objects including political figures often anchors voters' political preferences and decision making (Campbell, 1980; Garzia, 2011). On these grounds, I contend that the need to be congruent with the admired figure in parasocial relationships would ultimately drive the citizen to align their political attitudes and choices with the political figure they admire.

However, the extent to which parasocial relationships with political figures color political attitudes and voting preferences may depend on the individuals' characteristics. It is argued that individuals vary in the extent to which they engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activities that

is conceptualized as the need for cognition (NfC; Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). This includes effortful activities such as understanding complex political issues and making judgements concerning political decisions (Caprara, 2007; Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). Research has found that the need for cognition correlates strongly with elaborative thinking and judgment (Eigenberger, Critchley, & Sealander, 2007), and is associated with a fast learning system that is cognitive, reflective, rational, and explicit (Petty & Briñol, 2008). Furthermore, as Cacioppo, Petty, and Morris (1986) pointed out, individuals with high NfC are more likely than low NfC individuals to engage in and enjoy effortful analytic thinking. In this context, people with a strong analytical tendency may be able to mitigate bias that arise from having emotionally laden parasocial relationships with politicians. Individuals with high NfC may perceive such emotional bonds critically and form their political attitudes and voting intentions based on their thoughtful considerations rather than simply following the political figures they like. This argument is line with Petty, Schumann, Richman, and Strathman's (1993) findings that, in people with low NfC, emotions tend to directly influence attitudes unmediated by deliberative thoughts. Hence, I expect that the associations between parasocial relationships and political attitudes and voting intentions will be found particularly among individuals with low NfC.

The present research

In the present research, I investigated the socio-psychological processes underlying the formation of parasocial relationships with politicians, and then examined the implications of such symbolic relationships on political behaviors. The study was conducted against the background of the 2020 US Presidential Election in which several political figures will potentially run for the Democratic nomination to challenge the incumbent, President Donald Trump. More specifically, the current study assessed people's parasocial bonds with Trump and

the three most popular Democratic potential candidates based on the latest CNN poll (as reported on December 14 by Agiesta, 2018) prior to our data collection: these were Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders, and Beto O'Rourke. In our study, I first investigated the links between news engagements and parasocial relationships with these figures as mediated by imaginary social interactions and, then, examined the extent to which parasocial attachments predicted the participants' attitudes towards the candidates' policy positions and their voting intentions.

I proposed the following hypotheses:

1. Greater news engagements will predict stronger parasocial relationships with a presidential candidate, and this association should be mediated by imaginary social interactions with the candidates (see Figure 1).
2. Parasocial relationships with presidential candidates should predict attitudes toward policy issues. Specifically, political parasocial relationships should be positively associated with the attitudes to the policy issues supported by the favored candidate. These effects should hold even after controlling for the effects of sex, education, ethnicity, party affiliation, and political ideology.
 - a. Furthermore, the effects of political parasocial relationships on the attitudes toward policy issues should be moderated by the need for cognition (NfC). More specifically, the effect of political parasocial relationship on the attitudes to policy issues should be stronger for individuals with low NfC, but very minimal (or non-significant) for individuals with high NfC.
3. Parasocial relationships with a presidential candidate should predict voting intentions. Specifically, the stronger the feeling of parasocial attachment to the candidate, the more likely that someone will vote for him or her. This effect should hold even after

controlling for the effects of sex, education, ethnicity, party affiliation, and political ideology.

- a. The effect of parasocial relationship on voting intentions should be moderated by NfC. The lower the NfC, the stronger the effect of political parasocial relationship on voting intentions.

The hypotheses tested in the present research were preregistered at The Open Science Foundation (doi: 10.17605/OSF.IO/MCWUD).

Methods

Participants

I recruited a total of 837 adult participants ($M_{Age} = 35.56$, $SD_{Age} = 11.20$; 45.2% female, 54.8% male) from the United States who were eligible to vote in the 2020 Presidential Election through Amazon's MTurk. In terms of ethnicity, the sample was comprised of 65.7% White Americans, 12.3% African Americans, 9.7% Asian Americans, 7.5% Latin Americans, and 4.8% other ethnic groups (the raw data is available at doi: 10.17605/OSF.IO/MCWUD). The quality of the data produced by the online platform was ensured by accepting responses only from the MTurk workers with a minimum 95% approval rate (Buhrmester, Talaifar, & Gosling, 2018). In determining the sample size, I relied on Fritz and McKinnon's (2007) power simulation using the corrected-bootstrapping method for mediational models. By assuming that path *a* is medium and path *b* is small, they suggested 368 as the minimum sample size to achieve at least 0.80 power. In addition, the sample size was also adequate to detect the effect with at least 0.80 power for the multiple linear regression analysis with 18 independent variables (the minimum sample size was 74 as calculated with G*Power). All participants were compensated with USD 1.00 that was determined based on the US minimum wage for 7-minutes-work. This research procedure was

approved by the School of Psychology Human Ethics Committee under the delegated authority of Massey University's Human Ethics Committee.

Measures

News engagement. I measured the frequency of news engagements using various mass media with four items asking “How often do you use the following media to get news about political issues and public affairs during the weekdays? (i). newspapers, (ii). free online news sites, (iii). television, and (iv). radio” (1 = never, 2 = less often, 3 = once or twice a week, 4 = Most days). These items produced barely adequate internal consistency for the present sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .555$).

Imaginary social interactions. To assess imaginary social interactions with the political figures, I first asked the participants with the following instruction: “Try to think back when you were watching or reading about [Donald Trump] on TV shows, news programs, newspapers, or on social media (e.g. posts and live broadcasts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram). Try to answer these questions as you would have answered them then”. Then, they were asked to respond to six items derived from Schramm & Hartmann's (2008) Parasocial Interaction-Process scale (PSI-Process) as though they were in the interaction situation with each four candidates. The scale included statements such as “I became aware of aspects of [Donald Trump's] actions that I really liked or disliked.” and “I often wondered what Donald Trump would do on his show.” (1 = not at all to 7 = very much). This scale yielded very satisfying internal consistency for each figure (Cronbach's α for PSI-Trump = .824; PSI-Biden = .918, PSI-O'Rourke = .958, PSI-Sanders = .927).

Parasocial relationships with political figures. To measure this construct, I employed Hakim and Liu's (under review) 4-item Parasocial Relationships with Political Figures Scale (PSR-P) that has been validated across three democratic countries. I asked participants to evaluate their feelings toward Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders, and Beto O'Rourke based on the PSR-P items which included statements such as "I find Donald Trump's life story to be inspiring." and "I am very sympathetic to what he or she wants to achieve" (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The scale provided very good internal consistency for each figure (Cronbach's α for PSR-Trump = .948; PSR-Biden = .943, PSR-O'Rourke = .950, PSR-Sanders = .944).

Attitudes toward the candidates' policy positions. This variable was assessed by asking the participants to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the candidates' policy positions, especially on immigration, tax, and gun control. The information about candidates' position on these issues were gathered from their official websites, and from www.ontheissues.org, a non-profit and non-partisan organization that recorded the US politicians' policy platforms and congress voting. The items included statements such as "How much do you agree or disagree with the following issue positions of [Donald Trump]? (i) Deport every single undocumented immigrant, (ii). Lower the corporate tax rate and huge tax cuts for working Americans., (iii). Arm public school employees to prevent school shootings (1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree)". In analyses, the scores across the policies were aggregated to create an index of attitudinal support for each of the candidates' aggregated policies. The reliability tests of the index yielded good internal consistency for Trump (Cronbach's α = .790), O'Rourke (Cronbach's α = .720), and Sanders (Cronbach's α = .750), yet very poor consistency for Biden (.081). One of the possible explanations would be that Biden

was recorded for taking ideologically unconventional stances on many issues throughout his decades of political career, as critics pointed out (for instance, see Mudde, 2019). Given this lack of reliability, attitudes towards Biden's policy positions were omitted from further analysis (see the list of the candidates' policy issues in the Supplementary Materials).

Voting intentions. The participants' voting intentions were measured using a single item asking how likely they were to vote each candidate in the 2020 Presidential Election (1 = Never to 4 = Absolutely).

Need for cognition. I employed the six-item version of Cacioppo, Petty, and Kao's (1984) need for cognition scale which had been adapted and cross-culturally validated by de Holanda Coelho, Hanel, and Wolf (2018). This scale was comprised of items such as "Would prefer complex to simple problems" (1 = Extremely Uncharacteristic to 5 = Extremely characteristic). The scale produced barely adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .525$).

Control variables. In addition, I included several control variables, especially for hierarchical regression models predicting the attitude towards the candidates' issue positions and for voting intentions. The control variables included gender, age, ethnicity, education, party identification ("How much do you identify as a Democrat?" and "How much do you identify as a Republican?"; 1 = Not at all to 5 = A great deal), and political ideology ("Rate how liberal (left-leaning) or how conservative (right-leaning) you are on: (i) Social issues, (ii) Political issues, and (iii). Economic issues; 1 = Liberal to 7 = Conservative;" Cronbach's $\alpha = .934$).

Analytical strategy

I ran a series of mediation analysis to test Hypothesis 1 using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). Hypothesis 2 and 3 were examined with hierarchical regression analysis. In

the first step, I tested the effects of demographic variables (sex, education, racial groups) on the attitudes toward the candidates' issue position and voting intentions in Block 1, added political variables (party affiliations and political ideology) as predictors in Block 2, parasocial relationships (PSRs) in Block 3, the need for cognition (NfC) in Block 4. Subsequently, the interaction terms involving (PSRs*NfC) were added in Block 5.

Results

Explaining the formation of parasocial relationships with political candidates

I performed four separate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression-based mediation analyses using bootstrapping (50,000 iterations) and 95% level of confidence to examine our predictions about the mediational role of imaginary social interactions on the associations between news engagement and the formation of parasocial relationships with the US presidential candidates (Hypothesis 1). As predicted, a full mediation effect of the imaginary social interaction was found on the correlational path from news engagement to parasocial relationships with Biden ($B = .744$, $SE = .074$, 95% CI [.605 .887], $Z = 10.0612$, $p < .001$). Moreover, I found partial mediation effects of imaginary social interactions for O'Rourke ($B = .699$, $SE = .075$, 95% CI [.556 .844], $Z = 9.295$, $p < .001$), Sanders ($B = .466$, $SE = .074$, 95% CI [.320 .610], $Z = 6.310$, $p < .001$) and Trump ($B = .664$, $SE = .082$, 95% CI [.495 .834], $Z = 8.122$, $p < .001$; see Figure 1). These results supported Hypothesis 1 that greater news engagements predicted stronger parasocial relationships with presidential candidates, and the associations were all mediated either fully or partially by imaginary social interactions with the candidates.

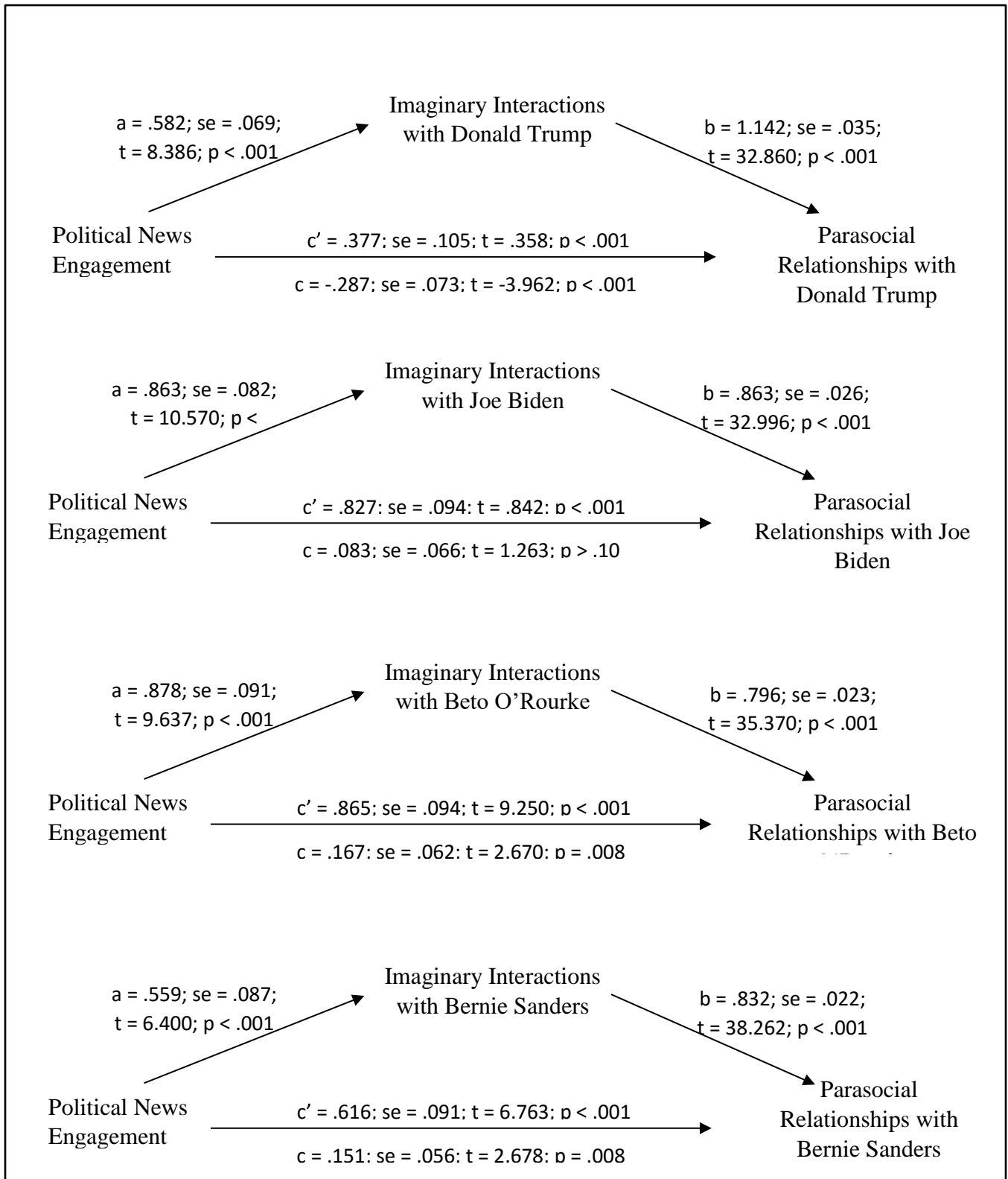


Figure 3.1. The mediation models predicting parasocial relationships with the candidates

Implications on political attitudes and voting intentions

Table 3. 1. The hierarchical linear regression predicting support for the candidates' policy positions.

Predictors	Donald Trump			Beto O'Rourke			Bernie Sanders		
	<i>B</i>	<i>se</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>se</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>	β
Intercept	1.875	.298	-	3.276	.307	-	3.325	.324	-
Gender (0 female, 1 male)	-.139	.065	-.047*	-.150	.066	-.060*	-.124	.070	-.047
Age (years)	-.003	.003	.000	-.001	.003	-.005	-.001	.003	-.005
Ethnicity:									
Black (0 no, 1 yes)	-.136	.172	-.030	.039	.177	.010	-.040	.186	-.010
Hispanic (0 no, 1 yes)	-.136	.187	-.024	-.058	.193	-.012	.192	.202	.038
White (0 no, 1 yes)	.040	.151	.013	-.108	.156	-.041	.037	.163	.014
Asian (0 no, 1 yes)	-.190	.179	-.038	-.153	.185	-.036	-.039	.193	-.009
Education (1 low to 5 high)	-.124	.036	-.077**	.024	.037	.017	.009	.039	.006
ΔR^2			.022*			.041**			.032**
Democrat (1 low to 5 high)	-.053	.028	-.051	.151	.031	.171**	.141	.032	.154**
Republican (1 low to 5 high)	.125	.037	.117**	-.030	.034	-.033	-.021	.036	-.022
Political conservatism	.235	.029	.286**	-.223	.028	-.319**	-.226	.030	-.310**
ΔR^2			.535**			.301**			.322**
PSR with Trump	.311	.024	.437**	-	-	-	-	-	-
PSR with O'Rourke	-	-	-	.254	.019	.388**	-	-	-
PSR with Sanders	-	-	-	-	-	-	.268	.022	.375**
ΔR^2			.078**			.118**			.102**
Need for cognition (NfC)	-.039	.050	-.017	.121	.052	.062*	.123	.055	.060*
ΔR^2			.000			.007**			.005**
NfC x PSRs	.057	.025	.049*	.039	.027	.038	.029	.028	.028
ΔR^2			.002*			.001			.001
<i>Total R²</i>			.632**			.468**			.461**

Note: * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$

Next, I examined hypotheses about the implications of being in parasocial relationships with presidential candidates on attitudes towards the candidates' policy positions (Hypothesis 2) and on voting intentions (Hypothesis 3). In doing so, I performed a series of hierarchical regression analysis with gender, age, ethnicity, education, party identification with the Democratic and Republican parties, political conservatism, need for cognition, parasocial relationships with each candidate, and the interaction between need for cognition and parasocial relationship as predictors. The model explained 63.8% variances of support for Trump's policy

position ($SE = .874$, $p < .001$), 46.8% for O'Rourke's ($SE = .925$, $p < .001$), and 46.1% for Sanders's ($SE = .970$, $p < .001$). Moreover, the model predicting voting intentions for each candidate was also significant, Trump: $R^2 = 76.4\%$, $SE = .554$, $p < .001$; Biden; $R^2 = 54.1\%$, $SE = .655$; O'Rourke: $R^2 = 55.2\%$, $SE = .631$, $p < .001$; Sanders: $R^2 = 53.1\%$, $SE = .706$, $p < .001$.

Importantly, the parasocial relationship with a candidate significantly and consistently predicted positive attitudes towards the candidate's policy positions: for Trump, $\Delta R^2 = .078$, $B = .311$, $SE = .024$, 95% CI [.264 .358], $p < .001$; O'Rourke: $\Delta R^2 = .118$, $B = .254$, $SE = .019$, 95% CI [.216 .291], $p < .001$; Sanders: $\Delta R^2 = .102$, $B = .268$, $SE = .022$, 95% CI [.225 .311], $p < .001$. The estimation coefficients for the effect of parasocial relationships was even greater than those of need for cognition, demographics (i.e. age, gender, ethnicity, and education) and political variables (i.e. affiliation as a Democrat, affiliation as a Republican, and political conservatism; see Table 3.1). Interestingly, the interaction between need for cognition and parasocial relationships was only significant and positive for Trump ($\Delta R^2 = .002$, $B = .057$, $SE = .025$, 95% CI [.008 .106], $p = .024$) but not significant for O'Rourke ($\Delta R^2 = .001$, $B = .039$, $SE = .027$, 95% CI [-.014 .092], $p = .151$) or Sanders ($\Delta R^2 = .001$, $B = .029$, $SE = .028$, 95% CI [-.026 .084], $p = .297$). The model predicting attitude towards Biden's policy positions was omitted because of the poor reliability of his attitude index. In summary, these results partially confirmed Hypothesis 2, in that parasocial relationships with the presidential candidates positively predicted support for the candidates' policy positions. However, in contrast to predictions, the effect of parasocial relationships could not be attributed to individuals with low need for cognition.

Table 3. 2. The hierarchical linear regression predicting vote intentions for the candidates

Predictors	Donald Trump			Joe Biden			Beto O'Rourke			Bernie Sanders		
	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>se</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>se</i>	β
Intercept	.690	.184	-	.788	.219	-	1.373	.209	-	1.850	.237	-
Gender (0 female, 1 male)	.042	.040	.018	-.034	.045	-.018	-.034	.045	-.018	.002	.051	.001
Age (years)	.004	.002	.038*	-.001	.002	-.012	.000	.002	-.002	-.003	.002	-.037
Ethnicity:												
Black (0 no, 1 yes)	-.305	.106	-.088**	.209	.129	.072	-.057	.121	-.020	-.005	.137	-.002
Hispanic (0 no, 1 yes)	-.225	.116	-.052	.085	.139	.023	-.056	.131	-.016	-.102	.148	-.026
White (0 no, 1 yes)	-.136	.093	-.057	.145	.113	.072	-.052	.106	-.026	-.099	.120	-.046
Asian (0 no, 1 yes)	-.174	.111	-.045	.166	.134	.051	.000	.126	.000	.076	.142	.022
Education (1 low to 5 high)	-.008	.022	-.007	.062	.027	.059*	.019	.025	.019	-.009	.029	-.008
ΔR^2			.041**			.085**			.043**			.056**
Democrat (1 low to 5 high)	-.048	.017	-.061*	.184	.022	.274**	.131	.021	.200**	.085	.024	.119**
Republican (1 low to 5 high)	.137	.023	.167**	-.052	.024	-.074*	-.016	.023	-.024**	-.087	.026	-.117**
Political conservatism	.066	.018	.106**	.030	.020	.056	-.064	.019	-.124**	-.048	.022	-.085*
ΔR^2			.564**			.247**			.234**			.237**
PSR with Trump	.339	.015	.624**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
PSR with Biden	-	-	-	.269	.014	.539**	-	-	-	-	-	-
PSR with O'Rourke	-	-	-	-	-	-	.291	.013	.597**	-	-	-
PSR with Sanders	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.320	.016	.537**
ΔR^2			.157**			.208**			.275**			.237**
Need for cognition (NfC)	-.029	.031	-.016	-.087	.037	-.058*	-.059	.036	-.041	-.080	.040	-.050*
ΔR^2			.000			.001			.000			.000
NfC x PSRs	.026	.015	.029	.020	.018	.026	-.010	.019	-.014	.005	.020	.006
ΔR^2			.001			.001			.000			.000
Total R^2			.764**			.541**			.552**			.531**

Note: * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$

Furthermore, the estimation coefficients of parasocial relationships on voting intentions were significant for all four presidential candidates, Trump: $\Delta R^2 = .157$, $B = .339$, $SE = .015$, 95% CI [.310 .368], $p < .001$; Biden: $\Delta R^2 = .208$, $B = .269$, $SE = .014$, 95% CI [.241 .297], $p < .001$; O'Rourke: $\Delta R^2 = .275$, $B = .291$, $SE = .013$, 95% CI [.265 .316], $p < .001$; Sanders: $\Delta R^2 = .237$, $B = .320$, $SE = .020$, 95% CI [.288 .351], $p < .001$. Again, the effects of parasocial relationships were greater than those of the traditional explanatory factors of voting intentions (i.e. demographic and political variables, see Table 3.2). On the other hand, none of the interactions between need for cognition and parasocial relationships was significant: Trump: $\Delta R^2 = .001$, $B = .026$, $SE = .015$, 95% CI [-.005 .059], $p = .099$; Biden: $\Delta R^2 = .001$, $B = .020$, $SE = .018$, 95% CI [-.017 .056], $p = .288$; O'Rourke: $\Delta R^2 < .001$, $B = -.010$, $SE = .019$, 95% CI [-.047 .026], $p = .576$; Sanders: $\Delta R^2 < .001$, $B = .005$, $SE = .020$, 95% CI [-.035 .045], $p = .823$. Hence, the results partially supported Hypothesis 3 in that the parasocial relationship with a candidate predicted voting intentions for that candidate. Contrary to predictions, however, the estimation effects of parasocial relationships were not significantly moderated by the need for cognition.

Discussion

The results are supportive of the argument that political news may serve more than just as a source of information. The current study suggested that political news can function as a form of narrative, with immersive elements that pull audiences into imagined social interactions and parasocial relationships with political actors that impact on political decision-making. It has been previously found that engaging in narratives such as reading novels, watching movies and so forth allow individuals to interact symbolically with the characters presented in the narratives (Gabriel et al., 2016; Gerrig, 2018; Oatley, 2016). In line with these, the present study showed

that engaging in political news correlates strongly with imagined social interactions with presidential candidates (i.e Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Beto O'Rourke, and Bernie Sanders), and to the development of parasocial relationships with them.

The findings concerning the individuals' ability to get involved in imaginary social interactions with political actors when engaging with political news sheds light on the social psychological processes which underpin candidate-centered politics (Wattenberg, 1991). While previous studies have largely considered people as being passively affected by personalized news coverage, the present study suggested that the social psychology of the voters should also be taken into account. Our analyses revealed that people have the ability to actively take part in imaginary social interactions with politicians when engaging in news stories. Our analyses also indicated that the more people engage in such symbolic interactions with political candidates, the more likely they were to have a sense of intimacy with them (i.e. parasocial attachments). In such symbolic social interactions, people arguably employ interpersonal frameworks, instead of political ideology or policy platforms, to comprehend political news, thereby reducing the complexity of politics into stories about aspirations, achievements and accomplishments of political actors and one's attachment to these narratives (Adam & Maier, 2010).

Although symbolic in nature, the present research suggests that the parasocial relationship with political figures arising from the imaginary social interactions with them seems to be potent and powerful, as it is likely to shape people's political attitudes and voting intentions. Our findings showed that having parasocial relationships with particular US presidential candidates was strongly associated with the support for the policy positions of the candidates (i.e. Trump, Biden, Sanders, and O'Rourke) as well as the intention to vote for them. The estimation coefficients of parasocial relationships' effects on both policy-support and voting

intentions were even consistently larger for all candidates than those for more traditional explanatory factors, including age, gender, racial groups, party affiliations, and political ideology. The need to be congruent with the admired figures in parasocial relationships arguably motivates people to align their political attitudes and choices with the candidates. In summary, the findings robustly reflect the important role of parasocial relationships in people's political considerations, particularly in the context of the 2020 US presidential election.

Furthermore, the correlations between parasocial relationships and the attitudes toward the candidates' policy positions and voting intentions were found to be consistent across individual with different dispositions of information processing (high vs low need for cognition). It was initially thought that the strong analytic tendency of individuals with high need for cognition would hamper the effects of emotionally-laden parasocial relationships on their attitudes toward candidates' policy positions and voting intentions. In contrast to predictions, however, the present study found mostly non-significant effects for the interaction between parasocial relationships and need for cognition. In other words, being in parasocial relationships with the presidential candidates is likely to become a significant factor in the individuals' political thinking regardless of their levels of analytical tendency. Interestingly, I found an exception for Donald Trump. The correlation between parasocial relationships with Trump and the support for his policy position was surprisingly stronger among individuals with *high* need for cognition. The strong cognitive tendency to process complex information apparently was amplifying, instead of constraining, the effect of people's parasocial relationships with Trump on their support for his policy platforms. Given the finding was not theoretically anticipated in the present study, further research is needed to replicate and explain this "Trump exceptionalism".

There are, however, limitations to the present research. First, our analyses were mainly focused on people's imaginary social interactions and parasocial relationships with presidential candidates who currently get extensive coverage from the mainstream or national news media. Therefore, I would caution to suggest that the same effects could be expected for political actors with very limited news coverage. For instance, it would be difficult to expect that, when engaging with news, people would be easily involved in imaginary social interactions with less popular politicians such as Don Cazayoux, Charles Djou, Hansen Clark, and so on. A second limitation is related to sample characteristics. The data used in the present analyses were all collected in the US, and thus it is plausible that the findings are bounded to the political context of the US presidential system. Karvonen (2010) suggests that in a presidential system like the US, it is almost natural that the news media and citizens give more attention to the individual politicians instead of parties or policy issues. Hence, it might be noteworthy to examine whether the findings are replicable in the context of parliamentary systems where the political parties typically get more attention from citizens and the news media than the political actors.

Donald Trump stunned many political observers around the world with his surprising election as the 45th President of America in 2016. Among many other explanatory factors, it has been identified that the parasocial bond arising from Trump's celebrity status was one key factor in his victory (Gabriel, et al., 2018). The current study presented evidence that parasocial relationships may also develop toward other non-celebrity presidential candidates such as Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders, and Beto O'Rourke. Such symbolic relationships may take form particularly when people are involved in imaginary interactions with the candidates as they engage with the news. Given the overwhelming accessibility of political news today, it is

suggested that parasocial relationships may play an important role in people's political considerations, especially in the upcoming US Presidential Election.

Chapter 4: Political intimacy in cyberspace: Preregistration study on the associations between passive news consumption, parasocial interactions on social media, and parasocial relationships with political figures across political contexts

Abstract

The growing popularity of social media as a source of political news had facilitated the emergence of passive news consumption. Adding to the literature on the negative effects of passive news consumption on social media, the present evidence supported our preregistered hypotheses that passive news consumers have a high probability to engage in parasocial interactions with politicians on social media (e.g. frequently reading, liking, commenting on, and sharing the politicians' social media posts) leading to parasocial attachments with them. Using convenience adult samples from two countries (the United States = 407; the United Kingdom = 407), we also found that different types of political system (presidential vs parliamentary) may have different susceptibility to this form of mediated political intimacy. These findings supported the notion that passive news consumption on social media may not be healthy for democracy.

Keywords: passive news consumption, parasocial interactions, parasocial relationships with politicians, social media, preregistration study.

Over the past few years, social media have increasingly become an important source of political information for large segments of the population across the globe (Pew Research Center, 2018). Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, offer a high-choice and more egalitarian media environment which allows users to not only access political news through social networking, but also to directly from political actors (e.g., presidents, prime ministers, and other politicians). The growing importance of social media as a source of news is reinforced by the fact that many prominent political figures, from Donald Trump in the United States to Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom, use social media as a primary tool to deliver messages directly to voters. Given the distinct features of news consumption on social media, social scientists have begun to examine the extent to which social media may shape the ways ordinary citizens engage with political issues (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Weeks & Holbert, 2013). While some scholars have argued and showed empirical evidence for the utility of social media as a means for political learning, especially for youth (Greenhow & Reifman, 2009), recent research sheds light on potentially negative side effects: social media may facilitate passive political news consumption (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018).

Generally, political news consumption on social media is healthy for democracy. As shown in prior studies, users who actively seek for political news on social media are more knowledgeable about public affairs and more likely to participate in political activities (Karnowski, Kümpel, Leonhard, & Leiner, 2017; Valenzuela, 2013). However, Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017) contend that being passively exposed to political news on social media does not necessarily translate into better political knowledge. Instead, passive news consumption on social media may generate a belief that one can indirectly stay informed about public affairs - despite not actively following the news – by relying on peers within online social networks. Unlike

active news consumers, it was found that passive political news consumers tend to experience little political learning over time and are less motivated to seek news from traditional media outlets (i.e. newspapers, television, and radio) (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017).

Given these negative consequences of passive political news consumption, one unexplored question is whether this may have implications for social media users' political preferences. Prior studies have indicated that individuals have specific preferences regarding the political news they are exposed to on social media and the internet in general. Furthermore, a series of laboratory and field experiments conducted by Kruikemeier, van Noort, Vliegenthart, and de Vreese (2013) consistently showed that internet users tended to be more attracted to information that focused on individual politicians rather than on political parties or policy platforms (also see Lee & Shin, 2012).

Against the backdrop of this literature, the present study aims to examine the pathway through which passive news consumers on social media may be prone to form the types of emotional bonds with political figures conceptualized as parasocial relationships. Furthermore, using a comparative perspective, the study also investigates the extent to which different political systems (presidential versus parliamentary systems) may play a role in facilitating or inhibiting the emergence of this form of personally intimate, and emotionally mediated politics.

Passive news consumption and parasocial relationships

A parasocial relationship refers to the notion that one may develop a feeling of distant intimacy with particular public figures, such as celebrities and politicians, as the result of repeated encounters through mass media (Horton & Wohl, 1956). According to parasocial theory, although this relationship is one-sided (or illusionary), individuals who hold parasocial relationships are more likely to perceive the mass media figures as though they were actual

acquaintances (Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Moreover, research suggests that people with parasocial relationships tend to maintain such personal bonding across situations, for instance, by following news or stories about the figures through different types of media (Giles, 2002; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). Given its specific features, parasocial relationships with political figures can be conceptually distinguished from other forms of political affiliations. This figure-based political attachment has been described as containing little political substance (Lenz, 2013). Instead, it mainly revolves socio-emotional bonds to individual political figures and their personalities (Hakim & Liu, *under review*) rather than identification with a party, adherence to political ideology, or a rational choice-based approach.

With their lack of desire to find political news, passive news consumers on social media may be prone to engage in a parasocial relationship with a political figure as a source of their own political opinions because this may reduce the complexity of political elaboration (Stehr, Roessler, Leissner, & Schoenhardt, 2015). While it requires a certain amount of political knowledge and commitment to comprehend and make judgements about the policy platform and ideological stance of a political candidate (or party), it might be easier for lay social media users to instead employ an intuitive, day-to-day schema of interpersonal relationships to understand and evaluate a candidate along with his or her opinions (Garzia, 2011, 2013). As suggested in previous studies, some internet and social media users tend to employ selective information processing in dealing with the abundance of political news online: they simplify by focusing on personal characteristics of individual politicians to form a political opinion (Caprara, 2007; Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004). A parasocial relationship may form when one finds a political figure she or he perceives to be positive and emotionally appealing as a person (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Rubin et al., 1985). Such a relationship shortcuts the amount of information

the person needs to process to make a political decision (e.g. who to support and whom to vote for). Thus, it logically makes sense to expect that the frequency of passive news consumption on social media might be linked to the likelihood of building a parasocial relationship with a political figure.

Parasocial interactions as the mediator

Parasocial theory suggests that a parasocial relationship with a public figure is likely to form when one experiences social interactions with the given figure through mass media (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). A parasocial interaction refers to a one-sided or illusionary conversational give and take with a public figure during media exposure situations (Horton & Strauss, 1957; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial interactions allow one to get to know a given political figure as though she or he encounters the figure in person (Horton & Wohl, 1956). They may invoke an enduring feeling of emotional intimacy on the part of the mass media consumer in the form of a parasocial relationship (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). Within a social media context, examples of parasocial interactions are when an individual follows the social media fanpage or twitter account of a public figure, and likes, comments on, and shares what the figure has posted (Dunn & Nisbett, 2014; Kim & Song, 2016; Lee & Shin, 2012).

Although social media interactions with political figures may seem to be more actual than merely imaginary, these behaviors can be conceived as parasocial because only rarely do the political figures reply to their followers' responses (i.e. provide reciprocity in social interactions). According to the existing literature, liking, commenting, and sharing a political figure's social media posts are categorized as being low-threshold online behaviors, since these require little effort from the users yet yield emotional rewards such as a sense of personal

satisfaction (Schumann & Klein, 2015). Given the low-threshold characteristics of such online behaviors, passive news consumers might easily be involved in parasocial interactions with political figures on social media which ultimately lead to parasocial relationships with them.

Based on the literature reviewed above, the present research proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: passive news consumption on social media should indirectly and positively predict parasocial relationships with political figures through parasocial interactions on social media.

Political contexts: presidential vs parliamentary systems

In addition to the individual processes discussed, there have been debates within the literature on whether contextual factors, especially the type of political system, might also play a role in facilitating the emergence of figure-based political attachments. Indeed, some scholars suggest that particular political systems seem to facilitate the rise of candidate-centered politics (Adam & Maier, 2010; Karvonen, 2007). In presidential systems, it is regarded as natural that the personal aspects of political figures are central in news coverage and daily political conversation: this is because people directly vote for the presidential candidates (McAllister, 2007).

Conversely, in parliamentary systems, citizens routinely vote for parliamentary candidates who are to an extent controlled by their political parties, and only indirectly influence the appointment of the prime minister (Lobo & Curtice, 2014). Within such a political context, individual political figures are thought to gain less attention from the news outlets and the voters than the parties and their policy platforms (Kaase, 1994): this is likely to inhibit the development of parasocial relationships with political figures.

Other scholars, however, hold the opposing view and argue that the candidate-centred politics could take place across political systems (Karvonen, 2007; Webb, Poguntke, & Kolodny, 2012). The penetration of electronic mass media, especially the internet and social media, into

the daily life of the population of a country tends to expose them to overwhelming amounts of political information that flows in from diverse sources of news, regardless of the political system the country has adopted (McAllister, 2007). The presence of the internet and social media provide users with a degree of personal autonomy to filter and process political news based on their own preferences (Wellman et al., 2003). Within such a media environment, parasocial relationships with political figures may function as an adaptive mechanism to cope with too-abundant political news from a high choice media environment, rather than being the product of specific feature of a political system (Caprara, 2007). Hence, passive news consumers across political systems might be equally prone to develop parasocial relationships with political figures. Taking together the opposing views about the role of political systems, the current study examines the following contested hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: the indirect effect of passive news consumption through social media on parasocial relationships with political figures should only be found in a presidential system (i.e. the US) rather than in a parliamentary system (i.e. the UK).

Alternatively,

Hypothesis 2b: the indirect effect of passive news consumption through social media on parasocial relationships with political figures should be equally found across presidential and parliamentary systems.

Table 4. 1. List of constructs and corresponding items

Construct	Item	
Passive news consumption on social media (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017)	PNC1	I rely on my friends to tell me what's important when news happens.
	PNC2	I can be well-informed even when I don't actively follow the news.
	PNC3	I don't worry about keeping up with the news because I know news will find me.
	PNC4	I rely on information from my friends based on what they like or follow through social media
Parasocial interactions on social media (modified from Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014)	PSI1	Read her/his posts on social media.
	PSI2	Like her/his posts on social media.
	PSI3	Share her/his posts on social media.
	PSI4	Comment on her/his posts on social media.
	PSI5	Like news about her/him on social media.
Parasocial relationships with political figures (Hakim & Liu, under review)	PSRP1	I am very sympathetic to what he or she wants to achieve.
	PSRP2	I find his/her life story to be inspiring.
	PSRP3	I would love to have dinner with him/her.
	PSRP4	I am moved by his/her speeches.

Methods

Preregistration

All hypotheses, power analysis, and analysis plan of the present research were preregistered at an online platform provided by The Open Science Foundation (see the anonymous preregistration document at https://osf.io/e36sz/?view_only=f59b9c0ec24049a089d9873f68c5ebb9). Preregistration is an important step in the present research because this helps increase the credibility of findings by ensuring the a priori nature of hypotheses, which substantially reduces the chances of erroneously rejecting null hypotheses or getting Type I errors (Lindsay, Simons, & Lilienfeld, 2016; Nosek, Ebersole, DeHaven, & Mellor, 2018). Furthermore, recent evidence suggested that preregistering a research plan can enhance the reproducibility of its findings for future replication efforts (Open Science Collaboration, 2015).

There were deviations in terms of the targeted countries and sample size from our initial research plan (i.e. originally 1,000 participants from Indonesia and New Zealand). The adjustments were taken because of insufficient subject pools from both countries on MTurk and Prolific Academic (<100), and also due to the limitations of our financial resources for data collection. However, these changes did not alter any critical aspects of the research, including the preregistered hypotheses and the power analysis (Lindsay et al., 2016), merely the location of the samples.

Participants

Our sample size was determined based on Fritz and McKinnon's (2007) power analysis using the corrected-bootstrapping method for a mediation model. By assuming that the size of

coefficient estimates from the independent variable to the mediator (path *a*) is halfway or medium and from the mediator to the dependent variable (path *b*) is small, they suggested that the minimum sample size to achieve 0.80 power to detect a medium effect (Cohen's $d = .5$) is 368 participants. For the current study, we recruited convenience samples of 813 adult participants from the United States (i.e. a presidential system; $N = 407$, $M_{Age} = 37.61$, $SD_{Age} = 11.96$, 42.5% female) and the United Kingdom (i.e. a parliamentary system; $N = 406$, $M_{Age} = 35.76$, $SD_{Age} = 12.37$, 70% female) through two well validated crowdsourcing platforms; Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in the US and Prolific Academic (ProA) in the UK (Buhrmester, Talaifar, & Gosling, 2018; Peer, Brandimarte, Samat, & Acquisti, 2017). These two countries were chosen as they are widely considered as classic examples of presidential versus parliamentary systems among western countries (Campbell, 1980; Garzia, 2013)

To ensure the data quality produced by the online survey platforms, we followed Buhrmester, Talaifar, and Gosling's (2018) recommendation by restricting participation to participants with 95% approval rate or higher. All participants agreed with the informed consent prior completing our questionnaire. Our research procedures have been approved by the School of Psychology Human Ethics Committee under delegated authority of Massey University's Human Ethics Committee.

Measures

Parasocial relationships with political figures. This variable was measured using the 4-item Parasocial Relationships with Political Figures Scale (PSR-P) developed by Hakim and Liu (under review). In administering the PSR-P scale, we first asked the participants to choose one among ten most popular presidential candidates (five Democrats and five Republicans) for the 2020 US presidential election (for the US participants) or among the leaders of the main

political parties in the UK (for the UK participants) whom they like the most. The four items of the PSR-P scale were subsequently administered to capture the participants' feeling of distant intimacy with their chosen political figure. The scale included statements such as "I am very sympathetic to what he or she wants to achieve" (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The scale provided good internal consistency for each sample group, US = 0.843 and UK = 0.816 (see Table 4.1 for the full item list).

Parasocial interactions on social media. A five item Likert scale derived from Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2014) was used to measure the participants' frequency of parasocial interactions on social media (e.g. following, liking, commenting, sharing) with their chosen political figures. This scale included statements such as "How often do you do the following on social media in the past one month? Like his or her posts on social media" (1 = never to 7 = always). The scale produced very good internal consistency across sample groups (US = 0.923; UK = 0.908).

Passive news consumption on social media. This variable was measured using the four-item News-Finds-Me (NSF) scale developed by Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017). The sample items included statements such as "I rely on information from my friends based on what they like or follow through social media" and "I don't worry about keeping up with the news because I know news will find me" (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). This scale showed good internal consistency for the US sample (0.793) and moderate for the UK sample (0.694).

Analytic strategy

Data collected from the survey was analyzed using structural equation modelling (SEM), employing multi-group analyses for the hypothesis testing (Muthén & Muthén, 2006). The multi-group analyses involved stringently hierarchical ordering measurement and structural

invariance tests required to confirm (1) whether the items that compose the measurements operate in similar ways across countries (configural invariance), (2) whether the factorial structure of the measurements is replicable across groups (metric invariance), (3) whether the latent means of the constructs are invariant (scalar invariance), and (4) whether the relationships among the items and constructs are equal across sample groups (factor invariance) (Teo, Lee, Chai, & Wong, 2009).

The multi-group analyses were performed in Mplus 7 using maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors (MLR estimator) and 10,000 iterations (Muthén & Muthén, 2006). The goodness of fit for the overall model with the ML-based method was assessed based on the criteria proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999): a cutoff value close to 0.6 for RMSEA; a cutoff value close to 0.8 for SRMSR; and a cutoff value close to 0.95 for CFI and TLI. The use of χ^2 has been largely criticized due to its sensitivity to large sample size (≥ 250), therefore, it was computed but not employed as a criterion of model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Furthermore, the multi-group invariances were examined by testing the CFI difference of nested models (freed vs constrained parameters), in which Δ CFI higher than 0.01 indicates that multi-group invariance is not supported (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002).

Results

Preliminary analysis

Prior to the hypothesis testing, we performed a set of factor analysis (PCA extraction with varimax rotation) to check for the convergent validity of passive news consumption, parasocial interactions, and parasocial relationships scales for each sample group. An item loading of a construct is considered as significant if its factor loading is greater than 0.40 (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Moreover, the convergent validity of a construct is

achieved if the average variance extracted equals or exceeds 0.50. As shown in Table 4.2, the items for parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships all yielded factor loadings that exceeded the cutoff point (>0.40). On the other hand, one item of the passive news consumption scale (i.e. PNC 2) was dropped due to its very poor factor loading for the UK sample (.047). This item elimination was theoretically acceptable considering that the remaining three items still adequately captured the concept of passive news consumption (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). At the construct levels, parasocial interactions, parasocial relationships, and passive news consumption (excluding PNC2) produced adequate extracted variances across countries ($>50\%$; see Table 4.2). In short, these results confirmed that our measurements had the required psychometric properties to proceed to multi-group analyses.

Hypothesis testing

Following the steps suggested by Van de Schoot, Lugtig, and Hox (2012) to test for multi-group invariance, we first examined the proposed mediation model separately for each sample group (see Figure 1). Table 4.3 showed that the initial analysis yielded insufficient model fit indices for both US and UK samples, RMSEA [90% CI] = 0.091 [0.079 0.104], CFI = 0.927, TLI = 0.905, SRMR = 0.062; and RMSEA [90% CI] = 0.079 [0.067 0.092], CFI = 0.937, TLI = 0.918, SRMR = 0.047, respectively. The modification index showed that there was a large covariation between items PSI3 ('Share her/his posts on social media.') and PSI4 ('Comment on her/his posts on social media.') unexplained by the latent construct (i.e. parasocial interactions) across countries ($MI_{\text{psi3, psi4}}$ for the US = 123.3; UK = 63.63). This might be the result of the closer proximity of the two social media behaviors relative to other indicators as evidenced by a consistently strong correlation between PSI3 and PSI4 across sample groups, $r = 0.838$ for the

US and 0.741 for the UK. Therefore, an error covariance was drawn between the pair for the model respecification (Brown, 2014).

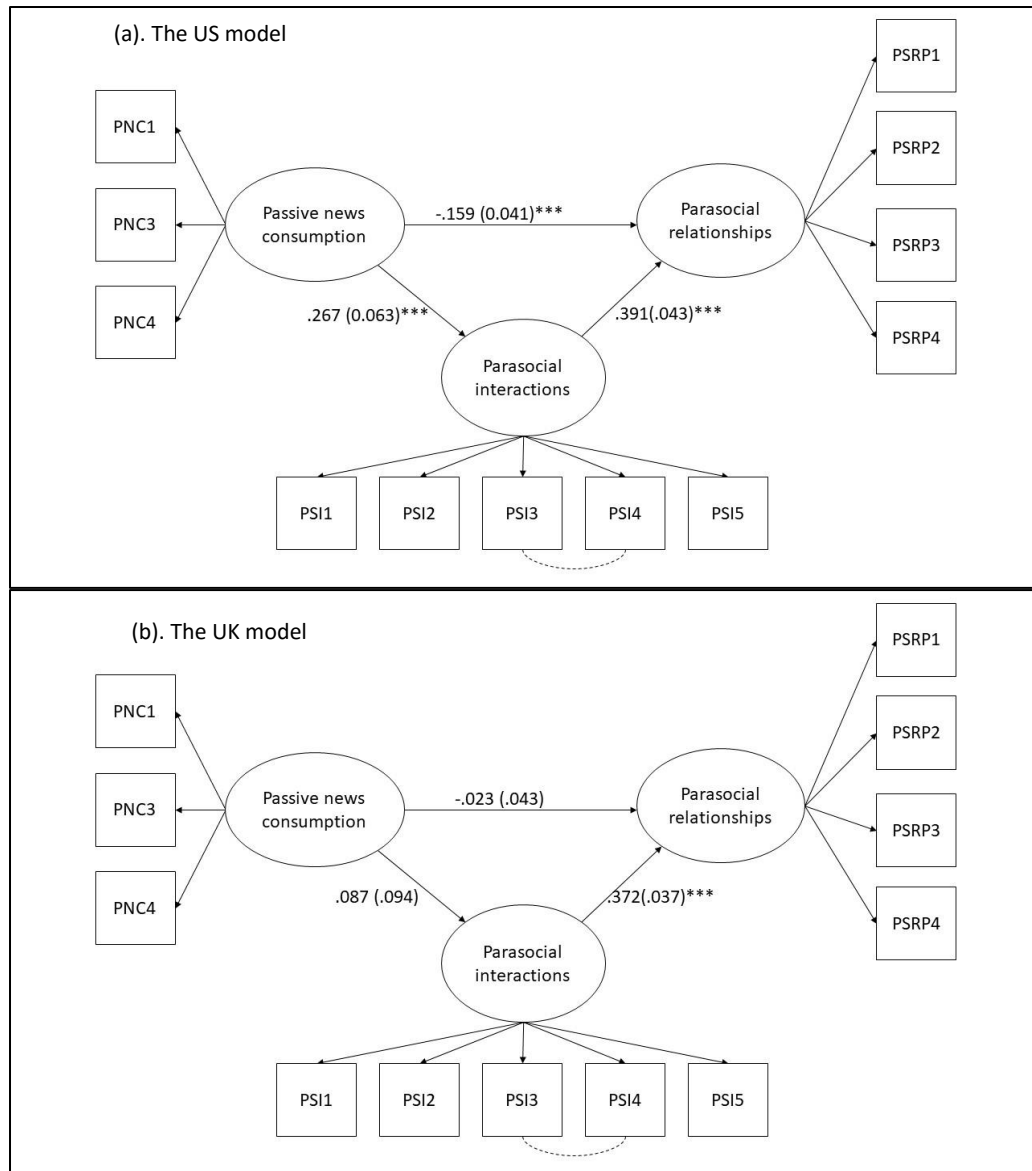


Figure 4.1. The associations between passive news consumption (PNC), parasocial interactions (PSI), and parasocial relationships with political figures (PSRP) based on the US (panel a) and UK samples (panel b). The path estimation coefficients reported are unstandardized (B) with the standard errors in the parentheses. The dash line represents error covariance. *** indicates $p < 0.001$.

Table 4. 2. Descriptive statistics, factor loadings, and explained variances of the constructs

	US (N = 407)				UK (N = 406)			
	M	SD	FL	EVA	M	SD	FL	EVA
<i>Passive news consumption</i>								
PNC1	2.83	1.742	.818	62.31	2.87	1.645	.847	52.80
PNC2	4.06	1.734	.467		4.45	1.537	.047	
PNC3	3.43	1.737	.721		3.86	1.720	.347	
PNC4	2.99	1.734	.808		2.71	1.577	.746	
<i>Passive news consumption (excludes PNC2)</i>								
PNC1	2.83	1.742	.851	74.00	2.87	1.645	.787	65.43
PNC3	3.43	1.737	.662		3.86	1.720	.473	
PNC4	2.99	1.734	.835		2.71	1.577	.835	
<i>Parasocial interactions</i>								
PSI1	3.73	1.855	.754	76.68	2.65	1.709	.787	73.96
PSI2	3.19	1.937	.902		2.04	1.529	.921	
PSI3	2.63	1.789	.884		1.72	1.327	.853	
PSI4	2.40	1.697	.821		1.52	1.138	.705	
PSI5	3.24	1.868	.846		2.30	1.589	.837	
<i>Parasocial relationships</i>								
PSRP1	5.01	1.489	.710	68.45	4.63	1.401	.681	65.34
PSRP2	5.29	1.337	.799		4.31	1.286	.760	
PSRP3	5.43	1.580	.698		4.32	1.781	.728	
PSRP4	5.27	1.511	.838		4.42	1.483	.765	

Note: M = mean score; SD = standard deviation; FL = factor loading; EVA = the percentage of explained variances. The analysis was performed using Principal Axis Factoring with Varimax rotation.

Taking into account the error covariance, analysis revealed that the model produced acceptable fit indices for both sample groups (US: RMSEA [90% CI] = .056 [.043 .070], CFI = .972, TLI = .964, SRMR = .058; UK: RMSEA [90% CI] = .059 [.046 .073], CFI = .965, TLI = .954, SRMR = .043). Importantly, the model was able to explain decent amounts of the variation in the endogenous variable (parasocial relationships with political figures) across countries ($R^2 = 27.5\%$, $p < .001$ for the US and 30.8% , $p < .001$ for the UK). Calculating the effect size (f^2)

based on R^2 (Jacob Cohen, 1992), we found that the model produced a large effect size on the dependent variable for both sample groups, $f^2 = .379$ for the US and $.429$ for the UK.

Next, we tested the baseline model or configural invariance (Model 1) by examining whether the hypothesized model accurately represented the data across the sample groups. As shown in Table 4.3, our analysis revealed that the model produced very good model fit indices, RMSEA [90% CI] = $.058$ [$.048$ $.067$], CFI = $.969$, TLI = $.959$, SRMR = $.051$. The results suggested that configural invariance was established across US and UK samples.

Further, metric invariance was tested by constraining the factor loadings of all items to be equal across sample groups (Model 2 in Table 4.3) and testing whether this significantly decreased the model fit based on changes in CFI. As can be seen in Table 4.4, the constrained model (Model 2) was not significantly worse compared to the baseline model (Model 1), $\Delta\text{CFI} = .007$. Therefore, full metric invariance was attained.

To test for scalar invariance, we constrained all intercepts to be equal across the US and UK samples. The invariance test was performed by comparing the CFI of the scalar model (Model 3) versus the metric model (Model 2). Our analysis showed that the model fit significantly decreased in Model 3, $\Delta\text{CFI} = .016$: and hence full scalar invariance was not supported. As suggested by Byrne, Shavelson, and Muthén (1989), we proceeded further by identifying the source of lack of invariance at the item level and found that the intercept of PSRP1 (*i1*) contributed greatly to the decrease in model fit. By allowing the intercept of PSRP1 to vary across groups (Model 4), our analysis yielded partial scalar invariance for the model, $\Delta\text{CFI} = .01$.

Table 4. 3. Fit indices for invariance tests

Step	Test	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	c	P	RMSEA [90% CI]	CFI	TLI	SRMR
1	US sample	223.281	51	4.378	1.119	.0000	.091 [.079 .104]	.927	.905	.062
2	UK sample	180.307	51	3.535	1.094	.0000	.079 [.067 .092]	.937	.918	.047
3	US sample (PI 3 and PI 4 covariate)	114.755	50	2.295	1.148	.0000	.056 [.043 .070]	.972	.964	.058
4	UK sample (PI 3 and PI 4 covariate)	121.348	50	2.427	1.058	.0000	.059 [.046 .073]	.965	.954	.043
5	Configural invariance (baseline model/ Model 1)	235.954	100	2.360	1.083	.0000	.058 [.048 .067]	.969	.959	.051
6	Full metric invariance (Model 2)	275.885	109	2.531	1.093	.0000	.061 [.052 .070]	.962	.954	.063
7	Full metric and scalar invariance (Model 3)	356.153	118	3.018	1.090	.0000	.070 [.062 .079]	.946	.939	.072
8	Full metric and partial scalar invariance (Model 4) (<i>i1</i> free)	329.034	117	2.812	1.093	.0000	.067 [.058 .075]	.952	.946	.069
9	Full metric, partial scalar, and full factor invariance (Model 5)	374.394	131	2.858	1.170	.0000	.068 [.060 .076]	.945	.944	.098

Finally, the variances of the three latent constructs (passive news consumption, parasocial interactions, and parasocial relationships) were each set to be equal across groups to test for factor invariance. Additionally, we also constrained the error covariance between PSI3 and PSI4 to be the same across groups (Model 5). Factor invariance was then examined based on the CFI difference between Model 5 and the partial scalar model (Model 4). As Table 4.4 showed, full factorial invariance was supported, $\Delta\text{CFI} = 0.007$.

Table 4. 4. Results of invariance tests

Model comparison	df	<i>Scaled-</i> χ^2	p- value	ΔCFI	Invariance
Test of full metric invariance Models 1 and 2	9	38.268	.000	.007	Accept
Test of full scalar invariance Models 2 and 3	9	81.775	.000	.016	Reject
Test of partial scalar invariance Models 2 and 4	8	53.067	.000	.01	Accept
Test of full factor invariance Models 4 and 5	4	30.998	.000	.007	Accept

Having established multi-group invariance for the model across US and UK samples, we subsequently examined the indirect effect of passive news consumption on social media on parasocial relationships with political figures as mediated by parasocial interactions with the given figures on social media. The indirect effect was computed using the delta method in MPlus with an MLR estimator (McKinnon, 2008; Muthen & Muthen, 2006). In the US sample, we found that passive news consumption on social media indirectly and positively predicted parasocial relationships with political figures as mediated by parasocial interactions, supporting Hypothesis 1 (indirect: $B = .105$, $SE = .028$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.049 .160]). However, our analysis also revealed that this indirect effect was not significant for the UK participants (indirect: $B = .033$, $SE = .035$, $p = .352$, 95% CI [-.036 .101]). This supports Hypothesis 2a, that

the indirect effect of passive news consumption on parasocial relationships with political figures is more likely to take place in a presidential system rather than in a parliamentary system.

Non-preregistered findings

In addition to the main results, our analyses also revealed several non-preregistered findings that augmented the preregistered findings. First, we found that parasocial interactions with political figures on social media significantly and consistently predicted parasocial relationships with them across US and UK samples as expected by parasocial theory, $B = 0.539$, $SE = 0.042$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.308 0.475] and $B = 0.372$, $SE = 0.037$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.299 0.444] respectively. In other words, the more a social media user liked, read, commented on, and shared a politician's posts on social media, the more likely she or he was to hold a sense of socio-emotional intimacy with this political figure (regardless of the type of political system where she or he was situated).

Considering the partial scalar invariance of our measures, we also proceeded further by testing the mean differences on passive news consumption (PNC), parasocial interactions on social media (PSI), and parasocial relationships with political figures (PSRP) across countries. As discussed in our literature review, it was expected that voters in presidential systems like the US are more likely to have a higher tendency to engage in parasocial interactions with individual political figures on social media and develop parasocial relationships with them than voters in parliamentary systems such as the UK. On the other hand, there were no particular theoretical expectations regarding the influence of political system on passive news consumption. As displayed in Figure 2, it was found that the US participants had significantly higher scores for parasocial interactions with political figures on social media ($t(811) = 9.853$, $SE = .101$, 95% CI

[.798 1.195], $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .691$) and parasocial relationships with them ($t(811) = 9.755$, $SE = .085$, 95% CI [.663 .997], $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .684$) than their UK counterparts.

However, we found no significant mean differences in terms of passive news consumption between the two sample groups, $t(811) = -1.659$, $SE = .089$, 95% CI [-.323 .271], $p = .098$, Cohen's $d = .116$.

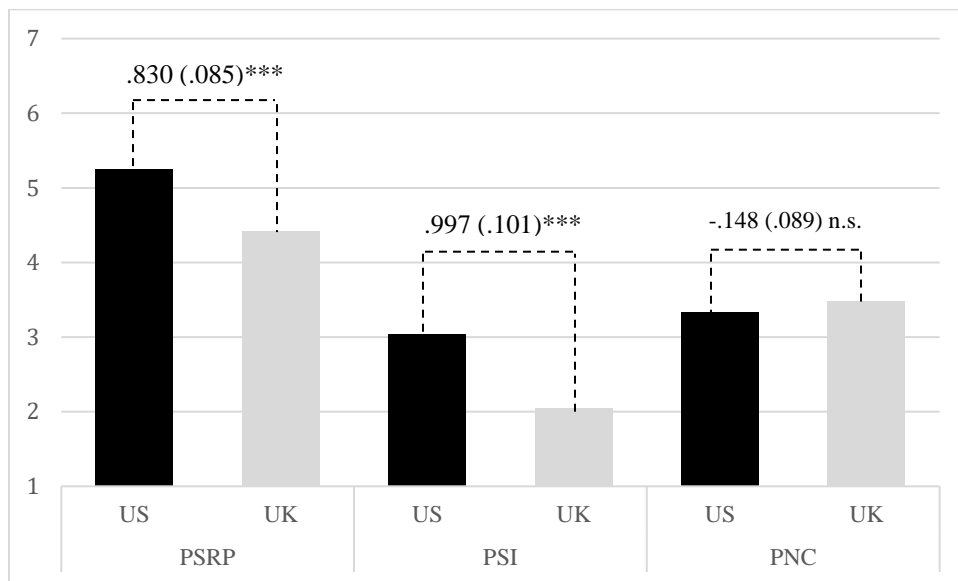


Figure 4.2. Mean differences of parasocial relationships with political figures (PSRP), parasocial interactions with politicians on social media (PSI), and passive news consumption (PNC) between US and UK samples. Standard errors are reported in the parentheses. *** indicates $p < 0.001$.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the possible consequences of passive news consumption within social media networks on mass media users' political preferences. As predicted in preregistered hypothesis 1, passive news consumers on social media were found to be more likely to have parasocial relationships with political figures. More specifically, we found that passive news consumers were more likely to engage in parasocial interactions with

politicians on social media by frequently reading, liking, commenting on, and sharing what the politicians (e.g. presidential candidates and party leaders) posted on their social media accounts or fan pages. Support for the model of indirect effects tested suggests that passive news consumers' parasocial relationships with political figures may emerge through their online parasocial interactions with their preferred figure.

The lack of desire among passive news consumers on social media to find political news seems to be the key that drives these users to get involved in parasocial interactions with politicians. Unlike active news consumption that requires a certain amount of effort, parasocial interactions with politicians on social media are low-threshold; that is, liking, commenting, and sharing politicians' social media posts are easy acts to perform and yet evoke personal satisfaction (Schumann & Klein, 2015). Furthermore, interacting with politicians parasocially on social media permits a passive news consumer to employ the interpersonal relationship schema, that is naturally intuitive, to evaluate and understand politicians as individuals rather than as party representatives (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Garzia, 2011). There is a comfort zone here where the rarified domain of national politics can be treated as just another social interaction with a liked or admired other.

The tendency of passive news consumers within social media networks to involve themselves in parasocial relationships with political figures has theoretical and societal implications. Previous research suggests that people who are parasocially attached to certain political figures tend to be politically blinded by such emotional bonding. Several studies show that they tend to trust the figures highly, shift their political attitudes following the figures' opinions, firmly believe in their promises, and vote for them (Jonathan Cohen & Holbert, 2018;

Dunn & Nisbett, 2014; Gabriel, Paravati, Green, & Flomsbee, 2018; Lenz, 2013). These tendencies might amplify the negative effects of passive news consumption through social media: not only are passive news consumers ill-informed politically because of their lack of knowledge as found in prior studies (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018), they may also be deprived from being able to engage in open and rational political discussion with opponents as a result of their parasocial attachments. Taken together, these findings suggest that passive news consumption on social media might not be healthy for democracy as it might hamper informed and rational political discussions among citizens, especially between those with parasocial relationships to opposing figures.

Contextual variations

It is important to note that there were variations in the relationship of passive news consumption to political parasocial interactions and relationships across political contexts. In support of hypothesis 2a, the present evidence demonstrates that the association between passive news consumption and parasocial interactions was significant for the US participants but not for their UK counterparts. In other words, the passive news consumers in the parliamentary system examined were less inclined to read, like, comment on, share the politicians' posts on social media than those who in the presidential system examined. They were also less likely to be parasocially attached to their politicians.

These findings suggest that whether or not passive news consumers on social media are prone to parasocial attachments to politicians is also contingent upon the centrality of individual politicians relative to political parties within the political system of a country. In presidential systems like the US, the contestation between individual candidates are omnipresent in virtually

all dimensions of politics, particularly during the presidential election. Within this context, being focused on individual politicians and being attached to them parasocially are perhaps functional for citizens, including passive news consumers, as a convenient way of engaging with political issues. In line with this assertion, our analyses revealed that the US participants had significantly higher frequency of interactions with presidential candidates on social media and higher intensity of parasocial relationships with them than the UK participants with their party leaders.

Limitations

Aside from the findings, there are two main limitations of the present study to consider. First, our analyses were conducted based on convenience adult samples from the US and UK. Although one may need to be cautious for generalizing the findings, the sample size used in the present study ensure that our hypotheses were examined with a sufficient power (.80) to detect the effect (Jacob Cohen, 1992). Second, our model was tested with cross-sectional data, which does not inform any causal inferences from the findings. Further studies are needed to examine the causal effects of passive news consumption as an antecedent of political intimacy using longitudinal or time-series data.

Conclusion

In summary, the present analyses support our preregistered hypotheses that passive news consumption on social media is associated with parasocial attachments with political figures through parasocial interactions with the figures on social media. These patterns of relationships were particularly observed in a presidential system where the individual candidates are traditionally more central in political dynamics than the political parties compared to in a parliamentary system. Assessing the impacts of parasocial attachments to politicians within the

broader context of democracy will be a fruitful avenue for future research given the increasingly central role of social media as a source of political news across the globe today.

Chapter 5: General Discussion

The overwhelming presence of multiple news media today has brought up new challenges for democracy around the world. On the one hand, scholars have long believed that the availability of mass media is critical in democracy, as it helps citizens to get better informed and make political choices rationally. On the other hand, the rapid penetration of low-cost mass media, especially online news sites and social media, have facilitated non-conventional ways of political engagement, which may shape the course of democracy in the future. One of these challenges is observed in the form of political personalization. As I discussed in previous chapters, the personalization of politics refers to a specific phenomenon where citizens rely heavily on one-sided (or imagined) relationships with individual political figures, instead of the political party they represent. In such personalized politics, people develop an illusionary intimacy with popular political figures (e.g. Donald Trump, Justin Trudeau, Jacinda Ardern, Joko Widodo). Here I conceptualized the intimacy felt by a voter to a particular political figure as a form of parasocial relationships. The purpose of the present doctoral thesis is to shed light on the social psychological process underpinning this political personalization, identify the conditional factors where such bonding is likely to thrive, investigate the implications of having psychological bonds with political candidates on electoral behaviors and, finally, examine its links with mass media usage.

It has been argued that the accessibility of various mass media has brought political figures closer to lay people (Garzia, 2011); citizens can follow the news about political figures virtually at any time and place. Drawing ideas from communications and media psychology

literature, I contend that such phenomenon can be essentially understood as a form of parasocial relationships, namely a one-sided feeling of intimacy at the distance that people hold towards public figures (e.g. celebrities, sportsmen, and politicians). The evidence presented here suggests that parasocial relationships with political figures play a crucial role in shaping people's political thoughts and decision-making. In this concluding chapter, I elaborate further the theoretical implications of such symbolic interpersonal relationships with political actors within the broader context of the political psychology literature. The practical implications of the current findings will also be discussed in light of the growingly personalized politics of democracy today.

As briefly mentioned above, psychological studies of mass political behavior have traditionally emphasized a great deal the importance of party identification and political ideology as two kinds of political attachment that strongly influence people's political considerations and choices. For instance, in their classic text *The American Voter*, Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1980) had long observed that a great number of people in the US have a sense of attachment with one party or the other. It is argued that people with a strong party identification are predisposed to align their political attitudes and choices with the party they are attached to. Party identification is theorized to form through socialization from parents to children and are therefore relatively stable over time. As Campbell et al (1980) point out, "often a change of candidates and a broad alteration in the nature of the issues disturb very little the relative partisanship of a set of electoral units..." (p. 121). Meanwhile, other scholars have put more emphasis on the centrality of political ideology as the source of individuals' political predispositions. As in the case of party identification, ideological beliefs are theorized to be transmitted from parents to children and from peer and reference groups, especially when one's

identity is involved in the process of development (Sears & Levy, 2003). Political ideology is argued to have a sort of heuristic function in the context of electoral politics. Jost, Federico, and Napier (2009) suggest that for citizens who are sufficiently motivated, relying on right-left ideology can shortcut the need to process information about the candidates' policy platforms on various issues, by simply matching their own preferences with the candidates' ideological cues.

In my thesis, I provided evidence that people may also develop affective attachments toward political actors in the form of parasocial relationships. A parasocial relationship with a political figure is more than merely a positive attitude towards the figure (i.e. like/dislike or a feeling thermometer). Instead it represents a potent and powerful symbolic intimacy with a candidate that can shape people's political attitudes and thoughts. My analyses revealed that those who hold a parasocial relationship with a certain candidate are more likely to support the candidate's policy positions and vote for him or her. Of course, parasocial relationships may not be as developmentally stable as party identification or political ideology because of its substantial contingency upon engagements with mass media. More specifically, as demonstrated in Chapter 3, parasocial relationships with political candidates are likely to form when people engage in imaginary interactions with the candidates during their news media exposures. When people's engagements with news media are limited, the intensity of the parasocial relationships with the candidates will weaken, as mass media (especially social media) constitute constraints for maintaining these symbolic relationships. Nevertheless, my analyses revealed that parasocial relationships could explain a great deal of variance in voters' political attitudes and voting intentions, at times even greater than that explained by party identities, political ideology, or demographic factors, especially in the US context.

Meanwhile, at more macro levels, the importance of political parasocial relationships might be supported by the fact that the influence of political parties and social cleavages (e.g. ethnic groups) is declining in conjunction with the rising popularity of new media (McAllister, 2007; Wattenberg, 1995). For instance, Corbett and Venedal (2018) observed that political parties in western countries today are struggling to retain members, losing trust from their constituents, and increasingly rely on individual political figures to attract support. In line with this, Garzia (2011) showed evidence from Germany, Netherland, Italy, and the UK where people's identification with political parties (partisanship) increasingly depends on their affective evaluation of the party leaders. On the other hand, the development of mass media technology, especially social media, has enabled ordinary people to directly follow and engage in quasi-social interactions with political figures. Social media has been widely used by politicians to represent themselves as relational objects voters can personally associate with (Lee, 2013), eroding the centrality of political parties and social cleavages as the electoral brokers (Enli, et al., 2016). In support of this assertion, in Chapter 4, I presented evidence that people's social media interactions with particular political figures are strongly associated with the formation of parasocial relationships with them.

One important aspect of parasocial attachments with political figures which needs to be clarified further is whether it reflects certain authoritarian tendencies. According to the authoritarian personality and right wing authoritarianism models (Adorno, et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1988, Duckitt, 2001), people possess, in varying degrees, the tendency to build psychological bonds with strong political leaders, especially in crises (Oesterreich, 2005). They further posit that individuals with high authoritarian personality are predisposed to submitting themselves to

the ruling authority and its strong leadership in order to bask in the reflected glory of their power, status, and fame (Adorno, et al., 1950; Oesterreich, 2005). Despite its similarity in terms of emotional attachments to political leaders, however, parasocial relationship is conceptually and empirically distinguishable from authoritarianism. I contend that parasocial relationship is more egalitarian, friendly, and personal, and does not involve the need for submission to authority. Indeed, my analyses revealed that parasocial relationships with political figures consistently produce weak and inconsistent correlations with two authoritarian tendencies, namely ring-wing authoritarianism and belief in benevolent authority, across countries studied (i.e. Indonesia, New Zealand, and the US).

Contributions to the literature on the personalization of politics

Having discussed the distinctive features of political parasocial relationships, now I turn to elaborate further on how the findings may contribute to the existing model of political personalization. In their recent book, Rahat and Kenig (2018) identified three types of political personalization: institutional, mass media, and behavioral personalization. It also has been argued that the increasingly personalized political institutions (e.g. the adoption of direct election of the candidates replacing the party-list system) and media coverage of politics (e.g. the politicians' private life) has created a culture of intimacy in candidate-voter relationships (behavioral personalization) (Adam & Maier, 2010; Garzia, 2011). In such intimate politics, as Stanyer (2013) describes in his seminal book,

“...the personal lives of politicians, like those of sports, film and television stars and hosts of other celebrities, have become a familiar part of the public's daily media consumption. The public.... know more detail about politicians' personal lives than their policy stance or voting records. Like

celebrities in other fields, they have willingly surrendered their privacy, or have been unable to defend it from a celebrity-obsessed media”.

Despite the detailed descriptions of such intimacy politics, the psychological process by which such intimacy occurs among the voters has been still under-theorized in the existing model of political personalization. The lack of clarity on this psychological process may consequently inhibit personalization scholars from building a coherent theory of behavioral personalization, and empirically examine its antecedents, process and consequences for individual level attributes like voter preferences and decision making. With regard to this, the main contribution of my thesis is to shed the light on this psychological process by conceptualizing the voters’ sense of intimacy with political figures as a form of parasocial relationship. Furthermore, I have also developed a new measure (the PSR-P Scale), which allows personalization researchers to robustly assess parasocial relationships with political figures across countries.

Based on my empirical findings, there are four features of parasocial relationships with political figures that can further clarify and extend the current model of behavioral personalization of the voters, as follows:

1. *Interpersonal*. Voters can develop a symbolic intimacy with individual political figures through forming parasocial relationships. This relationship is interpersonal, symbolic, and asymmetrical because the connection is primarily between two individuals (a voter and a political figure), although in reality it is only the voter who holds this feeling (without direct reciprocity from the figure).

2. *Media-bound.* A parasocial relationship with a political figure is essentially a media-bound psychological phenomenon, as voters develop parasocial relationships by repeatedly and imaginarily interacting with the figure through media.
3. *Effectively neutral.* Parasocial relationships with political figures contain little ideological and policy substance, and yet play an important role in shaping voters' political preferences and considerations.
4. *Contingent to the system.* Political parasocial relationships are contingent upon the details of an existing political system; voters who function in a system in which the influence of parties in political processes is weaker tend to have more vulnerability to symbolic intimacy with a political figure.

The practical implications

What are the practical implications of these findings? The first, and probably the most important, implication relates to campaign strategies. Politicians around the world have intuitively began to employ a more intimate approach to build up voters' connections with them. For instance, Narendra Modi of India famously pioneered the use of hologram technology in his 2014 campaign which allows him to reach out millions of voters and speak live at campaign trails in dozens of remote areas at the same time as though he was there at flesh (Nelson, 2014). Interestingly, Modi's strategy has become a model for other world leaders and prominent politicians, from the newly re-elected Indonesian President Joko Widodo, the South African leader Cyril Ramaphosa to US Democratic party hopeful presidential candidate Andrew Yang. Given the importance of building people's parasocial relationships with the candidates in electoral contestations, I would expect that the utilization of personal mass broadcasting

technology (e.g. social media, holograms, and so forth) and the candidate's self-presentation strategy as an individual instead of as a party representative will become more and more common in contemporary politics.

On the other hand, one may also need to consider the negative implications that people's parasocial relationships with political figures have on democracy. Democracy is built upon a naive and yet widely believed premise that most people make political choices on the basis of rationality (Achen & Bartels, 2010). Rationality is an essential part of democracy as it leads people to make effortful attempts to understand political issues, develop preferences about what the government ought to do, and elect candidates and parties that can carry out their expectations (Achen & Bartels, 2010; Corbett & Venedal, 2018). In reality, however, people's political decision making is very prone to many sources of bias. For instance, my findings showed that once a person holds a parasocial relationship with a candidate, she or he is more likely to support the candidate's policy platforms and stances and vote for her or him. This pattern was even observed among individuals with a high tendency for thinking analytically (i.e. a high need for cognition). In other words, parasocial relationships seem to have prevented people from thoughtfully considering their political choices. Of course, such biases may also arise from other forms of political attachments, especially party identification and political ideology. Nonetheless, party identification and ideology still serve the interest of one's socio-political groups (Achen & Bartels, 2010). This is quite different from parasocial relationships which seem to be easily manipulated to benefit the personal interests and agenda of certain political figures.

Limitations and future research

There are several limitations of the present doctoral project which should be considered when taking inferences from the findings. First, though I've explained and provided evidence of the intervening process (i.e. imagined social interactions) through which news engagements may lead to the formation of parasocial relationships with political figures, it is not yet clear as to what kind of motivational factors that might encourage individuals to engage in such imaginary interactions. Given the interpersonal nature of parasocial relationships, future research may utilize existing social psychological theories to further explain and empirically investigate this motivational process. Such theories include social exchange theory (Emerson, 1976), implicit theories of relationships (Knee & Petty, 2013), and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1979).

Further, all the data presented here were collected through cross-sectional surveys. Whilst I have attempted to maintain the robustness of the findings by testing the key hypotheses with cross-national data (and pre-registered hypotheses), the cross-sectional nature of the data should limit causal inferences from the results. Given this, I would suggest the use of experimental methods in the future studies to examine both the antecedents and consequences of political parasocial relationships. For instance, one may create a narrative to manipulate low vs high intensity of parasocial relationships with particular candidates, and then examine the extent to which the different levels of parasocial attachments with the candidates influence the individuals' ability to comprehend political news analytically and make political decisions rationally. Additionally, it is also important to experimentally examine the extent to which the adoption of new media in political campaigns by the candidates, such as holograms, avatars, and virtual reality technologies, facilitate the formation of parasocial relationships with followers.

Another important aspect of this topic which might need to be explored further relates to individual differences in the formation of parasocial relationships with politicians. In the current research, I have conceptualized parasocial relationships with politicians as media-bounded phenomena which can develop as people repeatedly engage with political news stories. Considering the relatively moderate indirect effect from news engagements to parasocial relationships, and the methods I used to select parasocial bonders, it is most likely that there will be individual differences in the tendency to form parasocial relationships with politicians. Such individual differences can be a function of certain individual characteristics such as personality traits, attachment styles or basic human values. Further research is needed to ascertain which if any of these individual differences might be of relevance.

Despite these limitations, my doctoral project offers new insights into the social and political psychology literature, that voters' thoughts and choices are not only informed by political factors such as ideology, party identity, and policy. The extent to which they develop symbolic relationships with political candidates seems also play an important role in electoral politics.

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