COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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Friends or just fans? Parasocial relationships in online television fiction communities

Abstract

This paper explores parasocial phenomena on social media pages related to Spanish television fiction by analysing the development of parasociality through relationships established between users and characters and the characteristics of this type of online community. The sample consisted of 4,762 spontaneous comments posted on social media pages (1,598 on Facebook and 3,164 on Twitter) linked to television series. Comments published between 1 January 2018 and 31 May 2020 were compiled the day after the premiere of each fiction. Our findings confirm those of previous researchs on the similarity between parasocial relationships with fictional characters and relationships in real life. This study also substantiates that women's comments show a greater tendency to draw associations between parasocial relationships and daily life. We also find a link between programme longevity and audience success on the one hand, and the intensity of parasocial relationships with the characters on the other. The relationships among community members reveal a degree of narcissism, prompting more self-disclosure than interaction with the rest of the users. Therefore, such relationships are closer to consociality (Kozinets, 2015) than parasociality, although significant differences concerning gender identity are also found in this context.

Keywords
Parasociality, television, fiction, characteristics, online community, social media.

1. Introduction and state of the art

First recognised in the late 1950s, parasocial interaction (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSR) between television viewers and media characters have become relevant in communication studies. A recent meta–analysis of 261 studies on this subject highlights that 50.6% of them focus on television and film (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). Given that television inspired the initial formulation of the theory of parasociality, whose essential characteristics have changed little in subsequent contributions, this result comes as no surprise. However, it is unexpected that despite the reach of computer–mediated communication (CMC) from the 1990s onwards, only 18.6% of the sample considered by Liebers and Schramm focuses exclusively on social media.

Since their origins, social media networks have attracted millions of people worldwide, most of whom did not know one other but wanted to share their interests with other people

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(Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Armstrong and Hagel (1996) pioneered research on the role of interaction in strengthening relationships between online community users who engage in a given topic. In recent years, the tendency of users to express themselves in communal environments is producing a progressive shift "from me-centric social sharing to more we-centric conversations online" (Reddit & Globalwebindex, 2020), in a context where technology-related activities are playing an increasingly important role in our lives (ONTSI, 2019).

The proliferation of cross-media extensions (smartphone applications, social media sites, etc.) to connect with TV fiction audiences leverage the dissemination of content and influence parasociality (Kyewsk, Szczuka & Krämer, 2018). Parasocial experiences on online communities drive interactions among its members, who find in this type of multimedia websites a host of educational, informative and commercial opportunities to become closer to the rest of the community (Shin, 2016). These community forums, which have become synonymous with trust and authenticity, also prompt some of the most genuine interactions in the digital space (Reddit & Globalwebindex, 2020). However, unlike the profusion of studies on transmedia relationships between television fiction and the Internet, there is limited published research on parasociality in online communities built around television content.

This paper surveys the scope of PSI (parasocial interactions) and PSRs (parasocial relationship) by analysing the spontaneous comments in online communities of the official Facebook and Twitter pages dedicated to Spanish TV fiction programmes (series, serials and mini-series). This pioneering work in Spain combines quantitative and qualitative techniques to analyse these virtual communities' configuration and the characteristics of parasociality.

1.1. *Parasocial interaction and/or parasocial relationship?*

Horton and Wohl (1956) coined the concepts of parasocial interaction and parasocial relationship to describe bonds developed between television viewers and fictional and non-fictional television characters. A year later, Horton and Strauss (1957) undertook a systematic description of PSI and PSR, highlighting their differences. The premature death of Wohl in 1957 may partly explain why this new field of research failed to gain traction until the early 1970s, with the paradigm shift in communication studies following the emergence of the theory of Uses and Gratifications (McQuail, Blumler & Brown, 1972; Rosengren & Whindall, 1972). However, more than a decade would pass until research on parasociality began to receive more attention (Giles, 2002; Hataway, 2008).

In the late seventies, Levy (1979) encouraged research into this field by creating a Likert scale to measure the reach of parasociality in local information, which revealed the existence of affective bonds between TV presenters and viewers. Drawing both on the Uses and Gratifications theory and Levy' scale, Rubin, Perse and Powell (1985) used a 20-item scale to study parasocial relationships in television news. Shortly afterwards, Rubin and Perse (1987) reduced the scale to 10 items, making it the most influential instrument of analysis in that field. In their first approach to the parasociality of television fiction, Perse and Rubin (1988) adapted the 10-item scale to the analysis of parasocial relationships with soap opera characters.

As with the research on Uses and Gratifications in the late seventies, the scales of Rubin and his colleagues did not distinguish between PSI and PSR, since both expressions of parasociality described imaginary relations between the viewer and television characters indistinctly (Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Rubin, Perse & Powell, 1985).

PSI and PSR have been used for more than 60 years to tackle a wide range of phenomena related to media exposure in fields such as communication, psychology, art or film studies. This partly explains the frequent imprecision in using these two concepts (Liebers & Schramm, 2019; Schramm, 2008). Although most research on parasociality comes from the communication field (Liebers & Schramm, 2019), some contributions from psychology from

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2000 onwards gradually helped to distinguished between PSI and PSR (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; Cohen, 2009; Dibble & Rosaen, 2011; Giles, 2002; Klimmt, Hartmann & Schramm, 2006; Schiappa, Allen & Gregg, 2007; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Tukachinsky, 2011).

Dibble, Hartman and Rosaen (2015) defined PSI as a sense of mutual awareness, attention and adjustment to a character during viewing, and distinguishes it from the more-enduring PSR. Hartmann (2017) views PSI as the simulation of a conversation during television reception and includes within PSR the relationships that users establish with media characters. For media effects researchers, PSI focuses on the immediate psychological response to the exposure event (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011), whereas PSRs are viewers' imaginary relationships with media characters (Tukachinsky, 2011). Bernhold and Metzger (2020) regard PSR as a long-term mental scheme about the relationship with a media character, nurtured by a continuous PSI. Vaage (2014) observes that program length seems to play a key role in the viewer's emotional alignment with antiheroes.

1.2. *Parasociality and non-fictional characters*

In their inventory of publications on parasocial phenomena, Liebers and Schramm (2019) found that nearly half of the studies (47.3%) focused on non-fictional media characters. In the other categories, fictional characters accounted for 25.2% and fictional and non-fictional characters for 27.5%. Schiappa, Allen and Gregg (2007) find some discrepancies in the results obtained from research in this field, although they recognise that most authors agree in highlighting their similarity with real relationships. We can broadly classify studies on parasociality between audience and real-life characters into three groups. The first group, which comprises the most contributions, focuses on establishing a comparison between the parasociality of the imagined worlds and real sociability; the second group examines the processes and characteristics of reception; and the third highlights the didactic nature and behavioural effects of parasocial phenomena.

Unlike the first studies, which attributed a compensatory nature to parasocial relationships, the authors of the first group agree that viewers tend to use the same criteria to judge television characters as they use in their social relationships. Perse and Rubin (1988) hold that mediated communication may provide the same satisfaction and even meet the same needs as interpersonal communication, induced by a sense of intimacy and the revelation of one's own intimacy, which arouses feelings in viewers. Kassing and Sanderson (2009) confirm the absence of causal links between viewers' feelings of loneliness and the heightened intensity of parasocial relationships. A recent study by Bernhold and Metzger (2020) shows that parasocial relationships with negative characters (real and fictional) increase depressive symptoms and feelings of loneliness in adults with difficulties in establishing and maintaining social relationships.

Research from 2010 onwards also reveals no evidence that parasocial relationships constitute alternatives to the absence of social relationships, but instead represent an extension of them (Cohen, 2004; Tukachinsky, 2011). The cognitive and emotional processes to connect with both their favourite characters and their friends are very similar (Eyal & Dailey, 2012). Thus, feelings about a PSR's dissolution resemble those experienced in real life (Eyal & Dailey, 2012; Rosaen & Dibble, 2017). Evidence has also been found of an increased likelihood of establishing a PSR with characters that remind the viewer of real people (Rosaen & Dibble, 2017).

The processes and characteristics of reception form the backbone of the second group of studies. The choice of media and programme are taken as predictive factors for parasociality (Conway & Rubin, 1991), as is the realism of the representations (Rubin, Perse & Powell, 1985; Rubin & Perse, 1987). Schiappa, Allen and Gregg (2007) underscore the ease with which parasocial relationships severed at the end of the series or with the character's departure are re-established in the next season or on another network. Eyal and Cohen (2006)

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find that women are more predisposed to parasociality. Rubin and McHugh (1987) do not view the exposure event as a determinant of parasociality, although this is disputed by other researchers (Schiappa, Allen & Gregg, 2007).

The third group of studies shows that parasocial contact facilitates changes in attitudes and beliefs concerning minority social groups (Schiappa, Gregg & Hewes, 2005). Hence, intense parasocial experiences can induce a stronger commitment to social norms (Hartman & Goldhoorn, 2011). Conversely, increases in both PSI and PSR are associated with decreases in critical capacity (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). In particular, adolescents are most easily influenced by the media characters with whom they maintain parasocial relationships (Bond, 2016).

1.3. *Parasociality and fictional characters*

Cohen's (1999) research on adolescents' reception indicates that PSI is more suitable for describing relationships between the viewer and the non-fictional characters, while PSR would better define the relationships with fictional characters. Shefner-Rogers, Rogers and Singhad (1998) demonstrated the role of PSRs in the effects sought by series conceived for educational ends. Other recent studies have shown that PSRs induced by fictional characters tend to be more intense than parasocial relationships with non-fictional characters (Hu, 2016; Tukachinsky, 2011), which is consistent in that PSI with a character is higher than it is when the actor who plays that character appears as a guest on a talk show (Hu, 2016). The meta-analysis of Liebers and Scrhamm (2019) confirms that viewers with greater self-confidence, problem-solving capacity and sense of belonging identify more with fictional characters.

Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) establish a direct link between the intensity of the PSR and its sway over audience attitudes and beliefs. PSRs with members of an out-group can influence the viewer's attitudes and prejudices to a degree similar to that induced by their interpersonal relationships with the in-group (Bond, 2020). Viewers are more likely to engage in parasocial interactions with characters they like than those they dislike (Tian & Hoffner, 2010). However, unlike what usually happens with positive characters, PSRs with negative characters are inversely proportional to the characters' verisimilitude (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005), although the attraction exerted by antiheroes is sustained by the fascination they arouse among the audience (Turvey, 2019).

Just as in real life, the break-up of a PSR with a fictional character is a negative experience (Cohen, 2003; Daniel & Westerman, 2017; Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011; Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011) suggest a direct correlation between the strength of parasocial relationships and the discomfort caused by their ending even though they agree with the findings of Schiappa, Allen & Gregg (2007) regarding the ease with which viewers replace both characters and programmes.

1.4. *PSR in online communities*

Studies on CMC in the 1990s focused mainly on the Internet's potential to facilitate traditional relationships and construct social identities (Giles, 2002). Hoerner (1999) was the first to adapt to the digital environment the instruments that until then were used to measure parasocial relationships with television characters. Hoerner proposed a 10-item scale, based on the scale of Rubin, Perse and Powell (1985), to study user activity, based on the hypothesis that websites had their own personality and could function as if they were people. Subsequently, the Internet's increasing interactivity attracted the attention of other scholars interested in the relationship between the user and the interface, based on the premise that PSI with web portals seemed not to depend on whether they included characters or not (Díaz, 2003). In general, parasociality researchers acknowledge its relevance to CMC if user-character relationships are sufficiently authentic and detached (Hartman, 2008).

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Ballantine and Martin (2005) stress the need to determine how certain community members can affect other community users' consumption behaviour, an extreme confirmed by some recent research (Kim, Ko & Kim, 2015). Social media strengthens parasocial relationships among its users (Stever & Lawson, 2013), but despite the crucial role of self-disclosure in forming this type of relationship (Chung & Cho, 2014), online communities' activity contemplates different degrees of involvement. As Hartman (2017) points out, interactive environments also favour non-interactive encounters, which can establish parasocial relationships over time. Unlike in traditional audio-visual media, the users themselves choose the communication practices used in their relationship with the rest of the community (Caro-Castaño, 2015).

Based on a study by Kozinets (1999) on the involvement of online community users, our research explores the two-fold articulation of parasocial relationships between, fans and characters on the one hand and the community users themselves on the other hand. The Kozinets classification combines two factors that are not interdependent (the relationship between users and the community's shared interest) to define the four prototypes that make up the classification: *tourist*, *mingler*, *devotee* and *insider*. The *tourist* lacks social ties with the group and has a superficial interest in the topic around which the community revolves. The *mingler* also shows a limited interest in the subject but maintains strong social ties with the community members. On the other hand, the *devotee* has a strong interest in the topic but few social ties to the group. Lastly, the *insider* has strong social and personal ties to both the community users and the topic.

Our study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What factors determine the establishment of parasocial relationships?

RQ2. What type of relationships do users maintain with television fiction characters?

RQ3. What programmes and characters encourage PSR?

RQ4. What type of relationships do online community users under study have with each other?

RQ5. Does gender identity influence parasociality?

2. Method

This paper analysed viewers' spontaneous messages posted on the official Facebook and Twitter pages of Spanish TV fiction premiered between 1 January 2018 and 31 May 2020. The sample comprised 60 Twitter and 40 Facebook profiles dedicated to the 74 series, eight serials and four mini-series on free-to-air channels and VOD (video on demand) platforms that were live allowed viewers to post comments during the data collection period.

The research was carried out in the three following phases. After viewing the programmes and collecting the sample, we identified the variables and prepared the codebook (Table 1). The second phase entailed building the quantitative and qualitative databases by coding the variables and describing the content of the messages respectively. The quantitative database, created using the statistical calculation program Excel, allowed us to store, organise and tap the information through SQL (Structured Query Language) queries. This database was created simultaneously with the qualitative database, made up of descriptive summaries of the comments. The third and last phase involved analysing the comments themselves.

The comments were manually collected to incorporate user contributions from the "Community" section of Facebook where, unlike the "Wall," page administrators do not intervene. The sample of each unit of analysis (the Facebook or Twitter profile of each TV fiction included in the sample) consisted of the first 50 comments made the day after the show's premiere. Gender identity was coded using the username or nickname (masculine or feminine) with which people identify themselves in their accounts as well as photographs, avatars and linguistic markers in the messages (personal pronouns, adjectives, etc.).

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After collecting the comments, we ran a preliminary quantitative analysis of the data available on the official Facebook and Twitter pages to observe the activity recorded on these pages. Combined, the two social networks had 8,666,456 followers (5,536,203 and 3,130,253 respectively). The number of "likes" was similar, totalling 8,593,215 (5,621,853 on Facebook and 2,971,362 on Twitter). However, the user activity on these social networks is very diverse, ranging from 2,195,799 followers on Facebook and 1,189,696 on Twitter of *La casa de papel* [*Money Heist*] (Antena 3 and Netflix) to 71 on Twitter of *La sala* and 117 of *Foodie Love* (both from HBO), to mention just two extreme examples.

In total, 4,762 messages were analysed: 1,598 on Facebook and 3,164 on Twitter. The codebook comprised 19 variables, some of which drew on the indicators of the scales implemented by Perse and Rubin (1988), Hoerner (1999), Auter and Palmgreen (2000), Schramm and Hartmann (2008) and Tsiotsou (2015), which were selected and adapted to the object of analysis. The codebook was divided into four sections: 1) Description, 2) Discursive style, 3) Narrative world, 4) Identity and community.

Table 1: Codebook for the analysis of comments from Facebook and Twitter.

Category	Variables
Description	
1. Programme genre	
2. Format	
3. Channel	
4. Period between comment No.1 and No. 50 (shown in days)	
5. Length (shown in number of characters)	
Discursive styles	
6. Authorship – Gender identity	Feminine, Masculine, Unidentifiable, Corporate Name
7. Use of visual or audio-visual elements	Photographs, Videos, Emojis, Others
8. Motivations	Comment on the reception/viewing process
	Recommendation of fiction (viewers)
	Self-promotion of fiction (corporate profiles)
	Complaint
	Request for information about the fiction (question)
Narrative world	
9. Plots	Positive, Negative, Neutral
10. Realism	Realistic, Unrealistic, Plausible, Implausible
11. Social issues	Y/N
12. Characters	Positive/Sympathy, Negative/Antipathy, Neutral
13. Identification/empathy	Y/N
14. Actors	Positive/Sympathy, Negative/Antipathy, Neutral
15. Direction and/or script team	Positive, Negative, Neutral
16. Temporality	Past, Present and Future
Identity and community	
17. Self-identity (personal experiences) concerning fiction) Y/N	Y/N
18. Pragmatic (action)	Initiatives, Requests
19. Conversation (identification and/or interest shown by other members)	Y/N

Source: Own elaboration.

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3. Results

The interaction model proposed by each of the two social networks analysed determines the frequency with which users post. The immediacy of Twitter's discourse meant that the first 50 comments on each fiction were mainly posted on the day after its premiere. The period between the first and last Facebook post ranged from 1 to 197 days, with an average of 59 days. There was also a direct relationship between the level of activity recorded and the audience rating of the fiction, as well as the degree of novelty (premiere or new season), the broadcast channel's target and reach (national or international). Conversely, the viewers' activity in the analysed communities did not seem to be conditioned by the periodicity of the broadcast (daily or weekly). Users' tweets were largely more expressive and included more emojis (24.5% and N = 776) than were the Facebook posts (2.1% and N = 34), yet they were also more superficial. However, simplicity did not appear to be linked to the length of the messages, since few of the comments posted on Facebook were longer than a tweet (6.8% and N = 109).

3.1. *Discursive styles*

More comments came from users with feminine identities (27.8% and N = 1,325), followed by corporate and/or business profiles (26.3% and N = 1,251), messages with masculine identities (25.4% and N = 1,210) and those whose gender could not be inferred from the available data (20.5% and N = 976). A greater distribution was found when each of the two social networks was considered separately. Thus, the distance between the number of comments with feminine and masculine identity is much greater on Facebook, with 35.6% (N = 569) and 20.5% (N = 327) respectively.

Table 2: Gender identity of the users' comments.

Social media	Feminine usernames		Masculine usernames		DK		Corporative usernames		TOTAL	
Facebook	569	35.6%	327	20.5%	37	2.3%	665	41.6%	1,598	33.6%
Twitter	756	23.9%	883	27.9%	939	29.7%	586	18.5%	3,164	66,4%
TOTAL	**1,325**	**27.8%**	**1,210**	**25.4%**	**976**	**20.5%**	**1,251**	**26.3%**	**4,762**	**100%**

Source: Own elaboration.

The group of messages signed with feminine usernames stood out in the daily afternoon serials pages and series set in the past starring women, whereas the action thrillers drew many more comments posted with masculine usernames. The media production company or the television channel responsible for the fictions were also very active on Facebook, totalling 41.6% (N=665) of the comments analysed, turning the official pages of this social media network into self-promotion platforms (35.7% and N=570). The self-promotional comments always contained visual or audio-visual material to promote the dissemination of transmedia content. However, the large amount of this type of webmaster's post usually aroused the suspicions of the audience:

> I see nothing but posts about the success of the series, but I have the feeling they're trying to convince us to watch the next episode [...] ... I think that the audience data for the first episode was mostly due to the build-up of expectation and the hype that they gave it. But I didn't even finish watching it, I got bored, I'm sorry, it has to improve a lot for me to keep watching follow it (*Cuerpo de élite*, [*The Best of the Worst – Heroes Wanted*] Facebook, 08/04/2018).

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The majority of the tweets were by users whose gender identity could not be determined (29.7% and N = 939), followed by messages from people with masculine usernames (27.9% and 883 comments) and those with feminine usernames (23.9% and N = 756). Men's and women's preferences regarding the genre and format of the programmes were similar to those on Facebook, although the comments from users with masculine identities also included many references to comedies. Company profiles (18.5% and N = 586) on Twitter mainly provided information on audience data, thus minimising self-promotional messages (8.2% and N = 260).

Many comments highlighted changes in viewing habits of the programme brought about by streaming, as revealed in the messages on reception (19.7%, N = 624 on Twitter and 8.3%, N = 132 on Facebook). Facebook users not only gave details about the reception processes but also published evidence (photographs) of their viewing and made plain their dependence on the fiction:

> I have one more episode to finish the third season that came out today, and I can't sleep thinking about that one episode left (*Las chicas del cable* [*The Cable Girls*] Facebook, 08/09/2018).

> Day 3 of finishing Élite [*Elite*]: I just can't wait for the second season to come out. I need more, I can't go on like this! (*Élite* [*Elite*] Facebook, 09/10/2018).

> I can't tear myself away from the TV today. Don't talk to me, please. I don't want spoilers. Goodbye world… until the end of the season (*La casa de papel* [*Money Heist*]), Twitter, 03/04/2020).

The desire to continue viewing was also evident among the viewers of the free-to-air channels ("When will Monday come around again?!!!!"). However, such comments were fewer in number and were usually not very expressive.

3.2. *Narrative world*

The messages on the narrative world (43.2% and N = 2,056) referred mainly to the plots (52.8% and N = 1,086), the actors (25.8% and N = 531) and the characters (16% and N = 329), usually in positive terms.

The huge production costs of the fictions on Movistar+ was reflected in their overwhelming success with the audience. Five of its productions, *Arde Madrid* [*Madrid Burn*], *La peste* [*The Plague*], *El día de mañana* [*What the Future Holds*], *El embarcadero* and *Gigantes*, were the most highly acclaimed in narrative world terms. By contrast, the daily afternoon serials *Acacias 38* (La1), *Centro médico* (La1) and *El secreto de Puente Viejo* [*The Secret of Puente Viejo*] (Antena3) received the highest number of negative comments, yet they also accumulate more messages than most of the series did. The characters of the serials that came in for most criticism were also the ones, along with the characters of the series *Cuéntame cómo pasó* (*Remember When*) (La1), with whom the viewers established the deepest bonds. This was remarkable, considering that many of the comments on the characters suggested a superficial relationship. The users usually mentioned their favourite characters positively (63.2% and N = 208), negatively (28.9% and N = 95) or neutrally (7.9% and N = 26). Citations or catchphrases associated with certain characters were some of the recurrent mentions, generally accompanied by a positive appraisal of the characters.

The gradual decline in the number of episodes and seasons of the series and the long periods that usually elapse between one season and the next made it difficult to establish a PSR with the characters. Parallel to this, the increase in binge-watching hindered the relationship between viewers and their preferred fictions as both the waiting time and the expectations raised by the cliff-hanger that usually concluded each episode disappeared. The daily afternoon serials, in contrast, retained their traditional television dynamic, which tended to strengthen the bond between the audience and the characters, as happened with the long-running series. The most longed-for character in the period analysed was the villain

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of the Antena 3 series *The Secret of Puente Viejo*, Francisca Montenegro (María Bouzas), also known as Paca, whose return was demanded by the audience after her absence in an unknown location:

> I don't like the patterns that it's taking anymore, it annoys me to see it to suffer. I want to watch something nice, maybe if it changes something nicer? Also.... MRS. FRANCISAAAAAAAAA!!!! WHERE ARE YOU????? TO INJECT SOME LIFE INTO THE NOVEL (*The Secret of Puente Viejo,* Facebook, 08/06/18).

Carlos Alcántara (Ricardo Gómez), star and narrator of *Remember When*, bade farewell to the series in the period under study, is the character who evoked more empathy. Hence, the users thanked him for his character role with whom many viewers admitted having grown up with and matured during his 19 years in the series:

> Thanks, Carlos. I survived my childhood and adolescence alongside you. With you I became an adult (*Remember When*, Twitter, 14/09/2018).

3.2.1. Social themes

Although messages on social interest themes had a generally limited presence in the sample (2.5% and N = 119), they underscored the depth of the relationships that the audience established with the television fiction. The fictions set in the past (generally dramas) prompted the most debate in this section (59.7% and N = 71), particularly regarding realism and historical accuracy. These comments fell into three sub-sections: the historical licence taken by the fiction, 2) the politicisation of the storylines and 3) the link between the historical context in which the plot takes place and current events.

The first of these featured critical comments about normalising historical portrayals of behaviours proper to the present-day (the ease with which gay relations, complaints about gender violence, among others are addressed). Other posts condemned the script's anachronisms or the *mise-en-scene* (for example, a scene set in 1987 with a song from 1989).

The second included posts related to Spain's historical memory and its treatment in the fiction. These comments tended to be harsh and, at times, reproachful of the ideological orientation:

> It's insulting. It's one thing to describe a historical event, and another is to hear, not once but twice, pity the ETA terrorists and pity their ETA families. That's enough. That's still an open wound. (*Amar es para siempre,* Facebook, 11/10/2018).

Finally, when reflecting and reappraising social changes, some users drew associations between the past or future and the present:

> It makes me livid to know/think that a drunk girl on her own featured in a series will be raped. It's a reflection of what we are living every day #LaOtraMirada (*La otra Mirada* [*Alma Mater*], Twitter, 26/04/2018).

> The series is a clear example of where the country is going, the poor are poorer with no rights, and the wealthy are wealthier with their rights and those of the poor. The rich ride on the gravy train and think nothing about the poor... even today, there's a startling pay gap (*La valla* [*The barrier*], *Facebook*, 19/01/2020).

3.3. *Identity and community*

Most of the messages revealing users' feelings towards the fiction (14.1% and 672 comments) were limited to a brief "I love it," "I'm in love with a character" or "It's the first episode of the season and I'm already crying." However, the few remarks describing the relationship between the viewer and the fiction confirmed that, in some cases, the characters left a deep impression:

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> I just saw the episode of *Remember When*'s anniversary... I can't forget that day back in 2001 when I saw the series for the first time. I become fanatical about it. I took an active part in the forums while I was studying psychology [...] In the last few seasons, I was very moved by how they dealt with autism (I have a motor disability due to post-polio sequelae, and hopefully one day they'll address the topic of the polio survivors and the current post-polio syndrome in Spain) [...] I love them...I love them... They're "my" family [...] (*Remember When*, Facebook, 30/09/2018).

> I don't know if I have cried about that 10-year-old boy who, like me, watched her in secret on [*Esta noche cruzamos el*] Mississippi, for the humanity of the characters or that great reencounter with La Veneno (*Veneno*, Facebook, 29/03/2020).

Many tweets about *Remember When* also voiced a particular nationalistic sentiment referring to this series:

> A series that's been telling Spain's history for 17 years and already belongs to all Spanish families (*Remember When*, Twitter, 14/09/2018).

Finally, some users drew attention to the educational nature of this as well as *Veneno* (Atresplayer Premium) and *Mercado Central* (La1):

> In #CuentameComoPaso I realised how terrible Franco's regime had been and how ridiculous it was in such a dark period when women couldn't ask for a loan or do certain things without their husbands' permission (*Remember When*, Twitter, 14/09/2018).

> This series is going to make history. The Javis have created a jewel, a work of art, which will help raise awareness, to learn, to respect and to empathise with the different human realities [...] "What is not discussed does not exist. And what doesn't exist, is excluded" (*Veneno*, Facebook, 30/03/2020).

> In love with the series. Thank you for making the disabled visible by creating the character of #Samu and making us look like strong people despite the adversities (*Mercado central*, Facebook, 29/09/2020).

User interaction was minimal on both social networks; the discourse of those responsible for the fiction and that of the users emerged not as a dialogue but as self-reflection, decentralised and with few links between comments. Only a handful of messages formed part of a conversation between one or more users (4.3% and N = 205).

Those responsible for the fictions never respond to the audience's questions, which were sometimes repeated umpteen times. Similarly, the few initiatives proposed by the viewers (2.3% and N = 108), generally concerning the stories' outcome and the broadcast time were also never answered. The only comments that usually elicited some feedback came in promotional initiatives by the fiction's production companies (competitions and/or video interviews) and posts by the actors. However, some Facebook messages conveyed a sense of belonging to a group, which even included viewers outside of Spain. The latter, besides providing information about their origin, usually added personal details, while at the same time expressing their wish to get closer to fiction and become part of a larger community dedicated to the programme:

> I'm Italian, and I'm crazy about medical TV series. Even since I started watching the videos on the TVE website, I've been hooked on Centro Medico. I'm sure I'll watch them all. I love Manuela González, I love all the actors in this series (*Centro médico*, Facebook, 12/10/2018).

> I want to join the fan club of the fantastic series on 1. acacias 38. I never want it to end l because I like period and classic themes. My name' s Johan Domínguez Sosa and I live in Sagua la Grande V.C. Uba Bendiciones –in Villa Clara Province (*Acacias 38,* Facebook, 17/03/2019).

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The official Facebook page of *The Secret of Puente Viejo* and *El ministerio del tiempo* [*The Department of Time*] also contained proposals such as setting up WhatsApp groups dedicated to the fiction.

4. Conclusions

Almost all the analysed comments expressed satisfaction with the characters and the fictions they watched. Many messages explained the simultaneity between viewing and the social media activity analysed, suggesting that the online communities had a bearing on consumption. Besides positive feedback, the repeated remarks about binge-watching underpin the impact of the new modalities of reception brought about by the streaming services of the free-to-air channels and VOD.

Our research reveals that messages posted by users with feminine identities, particularly on the pages dedicated to dramas, were the most active group. This is consistent with the fact that women more than men consumed more television and felt greater loyalty to fiction programmes (Barlovento Comunicación, 2020).

The spontaneous comments on the pages analysed outlined two antagonistic trends in the construction of PSRs with the characters. Unlike the amplified superficiality of the *devotees*' messages, the *insiders*' posts stood out for their depth and self-referential nature. The *devotees* –the true fans– enjoyed browsing through the online communities of their favourite fictions and sharing their knowledge of the community topic and their fascination for the characters and stories. On the contrary, the *insiders* are more concerned on the relational nature of social networks and combined their interest in the subject with a desire to form part of the community and often drew associations between the stories of the characters and their own lives. The linear reception, the length of the fiction (episodes/chapters and seasons) and the genre are the enabling factors that boost the construction of PSRs with the characters.

The personal messages and reflections on social issues were mostly posted by people with feminine identities, suggesting women's greater willingness to establish PSRs with the characters, while confirming the relevance of self-disclosure in building parasocial relationships. These expressions of PSR, which were very limited in the tweets, mostly centred on the daily serials and a few long-running series on the free-to-air channels –mostly drama genres– such as *Remember When* (on the air since 2001), which is consistent with women's preference for drama and their greater predisposition to reveal their intimacy.

The VOD series that elicited the most comments was the audience hit *Money Heist*, which ran two seasons on Antena3 and another two on Netflix, followed by *Elite* and *The Cable Girls*, albeit far more superficial than former.

The identification with the character of Carlos (*Remember When*), the most akin to the socially shared abstraction of "unique normality" in which viewers generally tend to recognise themselves, provide a paradigmatic example of a greater willingness to establish a PSR with characters with whom we identify or who remind us of real people, another clue as to the possible influence of fiction on viewers. Saying farewell to a series that began when this actor was nine years old made these fans feel sad; a feeling also expressed in the comments about the end of the season of some of the most popular Netflix fictions, such as *Elite* and *The Cable Girls*. The interest in the evil Paca (*The Secret of Puente Viejo*), a rare stereotype in the serials of medium or even low melodramatic intensity characteristic of Spanish television fiction, was consistent with the inverse relationship between parasociality and the realism of the negative characters.

The limited number of conversations in relation to the total analysed, more evident on Twitter than Facebook, was consistent with the scant interest by those responsible for promoting engagement and turning these official pages into real forums. Both the generalised tendency of the fans to solipsism and the narcissistic display of the *insiders* suggested that,

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unlike what occurs in PSRs with characters, the prevailing bonds among the users were closer to consociation (Kozinets, 2015), which is a relationship fundamentally based on the interest of the online community, whose influence on consumption is by no means negligible. Hence, the network of contacts built upon the relationships among the users predominantly acquired a *topical cluster network* structure:

Figure 1: Topical cluster network.
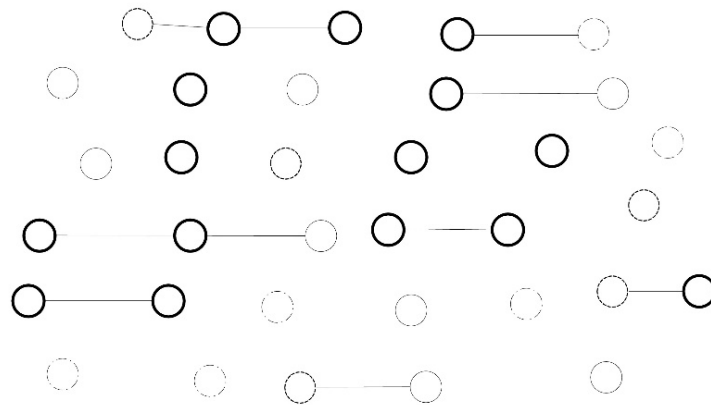
Source: Kozinets, 2015, p. 43.

The analysis of the viewer's spontaneous messages constitutes an original approach for the study of parasocial phenomena in the VOD era. One of the outstanding strengths of this study lies in the reliability of the comments made by the users in their natural environment, without the inevitable focus of the ethnographic method typically used (surveys, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups). The present study of the subject, which integrated quantitative and qualitative techniques, has allowed us to determine the factors that influence the construction of parasociality in television fiction to map it.

This paper represents a first approach in the communication environment to an unexplored field in Spanish television fiction studies. The results point to a considerable influence of PSRs with the characters, which could be determined in subsequent research on the effects on viewers. The sample size also allowed us to confirm the trend of PSRs among users, highlighted by other researchers (Hartman, 2017), as well as the greater potential of serialized television fiction in the construction of emotional bonds with viewers (Vaage, 2014). The results could be completed and contrasted with the analysis of virtual environments, from fan pages to influencers' profiles, in order to determine the medium and long-term impact of parasociality in *the era of we and the rise of online communities*, as Reddit & GlobalWebIndex titled the report cited in this work.

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