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Friends in Fiction: Bonding with Fictional Characters Introduced Through Fictional Narrative Positively Affects and Interplays with the Psychology and Social Behaviors of Adults to Influence Engagement

SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

Just as people can form relationships with each other, they can befriend and interact with characters. As broadening media outlets continue to introduce fictional characters, it is vital to understand the effects relationships with characters, referred to as parasocial phenomena, have on individuals. In turn, this will offer a new perspective on the effects of engaging with fiction. Bonding with fictional characters introduced through television or print narratives affects and interplays with the psychology and social behaviors of adults. Most studies support the positive effects of parasocial phenomena in terms of personality, mindset, and social skills. Other studies state that the repercussions of parasocial breakups outweigh its advantages. Some researchers believe parasociality is negative throughout the interaction, such as when readers engage with immoral or alienating content. Although many dispute or minimize the impact of engaging with fictional narratives and characters, forming relationships with characters positively affects people's behavior and disposition. These effects are evident through personality changes and prosocial participation in viewers and readers. Specific attributes of both people and characters mediate these effects, such as personality traits and motives. The topic is further complicated by dimensions such as content, but overall, parasociality positively affects readers and viewers during and after interacting with the characters. Content creators and readers should keep this strong connection and the magnitude of its influence in mind when engaging with fictional narratives. Discovering what narrative conditions maximize the positive effects of parasociality should be a priority for future research.

KEYWORDS

Parasociality • Fiction • Narratives • Social Behavioral Response • Engagement

Introduction

Tick tick tick. I was crouched in the hallway in front of the night light, quietly conversing with the illuminated pages of Percy Jackson on yet another sleepless night. I grew up as an avid fan of fantasy novels and movies. As I joined characters on their journeys, I felt myself developing opinions and special bonds with them. I found friends and enemies in people like Geronimo Stilton, Percy Jackson, Draco Malfoy, and Katniss Everdeen. In hindsight, this prompted me to consider the effects of connecting with these characters, especially how they could change my mindset and actions. After reading *Percy Jackson*, I developed a love for immersing myself in different cultures. After reading *Cinder* and watching the K-drama *Strong Woman Do Bong Soon*, I felt empowered to be a female. After reading *Kite Runner*, I was more empathetic to immigrants from third world countries. After watching the television show, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, I was more skeptical and careful around strangers. In this way, I weaved what I learned from the trials and tribulations of characters into my own experiences.

Just as people can form relationships with each other, I am interested in delving deeper into the dimensions of friendships and interactions between people and characters. This topic will continue to gain significance as fictional characters are continuously introduced via expanding forms of media such as television and movies (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). As people are bombarded with fictional characters in their everyday lives, from Netflix shows to novels, it is vital to understand the effects of bonding with characters. Understanding the nature of these bonds, termed parasocial phenomena, can help people better realize and gauge the effects of engaging with fiction. Specifically, I want to answer the following question: How does bonding with fictional characters introduced through fictional narrative affect

and interplay with the psychology and social behaviors of adults and how does this affect how we engage with the

world around us? We must answer this question to understand how bonding with characters may change our identities, attitudes, and actions in ways we may have never predicted. Although many dispute or minimize the impact of engaging with narratives and characters, forming relationships with fictional characters positively affects people's behavior and disposition throughout the interaction. These effects are evident through personality changes and prosocial participation in viewers and readers; specific attributes of both the people and characters mediate these effects, such as personality traits and motives.

Background and Terminology

Parasociality is an evolving concept that is rooted in the intersection of culture and science. Consumers of media often interpret fictional characters in narratives as real people, allowing them to form bonds that mirror interpersonal relationships (Rain & Mar, 2021). The terms parasocial phenomena and parasociality were first used to describe a viewer's relationship with media characters like television broadcasters and performers, but have broadened to include exposure to and bonding with fictional characters (Ingram & Lockett, 2019; Lacalle et al., 2021; Tsay & Bodine, 2012; Liebers & Schramm, 2019). Over time the topic became more interdisciplinary, and researchers in psychology began identifying different forms of parasociality such as parasocial interactions, relationships, and breakups. However, the definition of different forms of parasociality remains ambiguous in academia. More current researchers define parasocial interactions (PSI) as a short-term,

momentary awareness of characters and parasocial relationships (PSR) as a long-term, developing bond between a viewer/reader and character (Rain & Mar, 2021). In contrast, older papers use the term PSI loosely to encompass any bond with a fictional character that parallels a real-life interpersonal relationship (Tsay & Bodine, 2012; Ingram & Luckett, 2019; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). Since this definition of parasocial phenomena continues to fluidly change between papers and over time, I am adopting a broader approach used by Liebers and Schramm (2019). I will use the terms parasocial phenomena and bonding as umbrella terms for both PSI and PSR.

Historically, some researchers believed parasociality was an alternative for social contact in lonely individuals. Parasociality no longer harbors this negative connotation (Tsay & Bodine, 2012); Liebers & Schramm, 2019). Although some researchers continue to find evidence that parasocial phenomena can act as a proxy for real-life interactions, these relationships do not displace real-life interactions (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). This present interpretation of parasociality is a baseline for the exploration of its mediators and effects.

Parasocial Bonds Promote Positive Character Development and Reduce Biased Interpretations of Groups

Parasocial phenomena positively affect people's personality and mindset by encouraging introspection. Dill-Shackleford et al. (2016) analyzed research in the field to conclude narratives and fictional characters are important tools that urge people to question their ideas, build empathy, and answer personal questions about past

experiences. They use the phrase "dual empathy" to describe how some are able to both share a character's feelings and stir up personal feelings as they relive a memory while engaging with a narrative (Dill-Shackleford et al., 2016, 641). This contributes to a person's well-being because it means narratives are a safe space for thinking through emotions that help one realize personal truths and outlooks. Dual empathy allows for self-reflection while engaging with content in a more comfortable and individualized setting. Empathy allows people to better understand each other, and in this way, parasociality is practicing understanding other humans in a low-risk environment. People are more likely to adopt a positive mindset to overcome obstacles in their lives when they are engaging and empathizing with a character successfully battling their own obstacles. Since fictional characters can help one be more authentic and vulnerable, viewers are more likely to be more in touch with their emotions. Furthermore, Liebers and Schramm (2019) found that parasociality can lead to improvements in self-perception leading to increased confidence, efficacy, and perceived problem-solving ability. Building a relationship with a character can lead to more confidence in oneself, potentially because people can derive belief in their own abilities after bonding with a character in a similar position. Forming relationships with fictional characters positively affects people's soft skills as they are able to better reflect and acknowledge their current situation.

Next, parasociality can reveal biases in people so they are more open and inclusive toward others. Lacalle et al. (2021), Dill-Shackleford et al. (2016), and Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011) stated that narrative can lead to prejudice reduction and increased teamwork, so individuals are more open-minded and willing to diverge from a traditional viewpoint. After positively

interacting with characters who are different from the reader and viewer on screen or in writing, people are less likely to view similar individuals as part of the outgroup in real life. In this way, parasocial bonds facilitate open-mindedness in viewers and readers who are able to realize their biases. Furthermore, Hoewe et al. (2020) found that female viewers formed PSRs with female lead characters in non-stereotypical political roles, leading to an increase in political engagement, self-efficacy, and interest. Therefore, parasocial phenomena can help overcome stereotype threat (fear of confirming a stereotype about a group one identifies with) which is another instance of how parasociality positively changes one's mindset. Parasocial bonding can lead readers and viewers to feel empowered and appreciative of themselves. Engaging with narratives can establish a sense of belonging and provide insight to how people associate themselves with groups, even in a fictional world. In this manner, characters can inspire people to defy or reject negative stereotypes and prejudiced attitudes.

Parasocial Phenomena Connect Individuals

Parasocial phenomena allow for the establishment of or increase in prosocial behaviors. Lacalle et al. (2021) researched the creation and type of viewer-viewer and viewer-character relationships after looking at Facebook and Twitter communities for long-term Spanish television over two years. They found that characters in the media facilitated the formation of the online community and spurred relationships between viewers. This shows how character-driven posts on this platform pushed for the creation of communities between people in real life. Ingram and Lockett (2019) also discussed how social media and online

communication methods lead to more avenues for involvement between people. As people discuss the effects of these fictional narratives and the connections they feel with certain characters, they stir up discussions that would not have previously occurred. In this way, parasociality inspires connections. Hoewe et al. (2020) supplies another example of how parasociality leads to increased connections. They found an increase in political behaviors, or increased interaction with society, for some viewers who bond with female leads of political television narratives (Hoewe et al., 2020). Women who were discouraged from voting were motivated to have a voice in society as they bonded with inspiring and politically powerful characters. Parasociality invited such political engagement in people. Therefore, people engage in prosocial behaviors as a result of parasociality.

Building off of the previous section, a decrease in biases towards groups implies greater communication between different people. Liebers and Schramm (2019) reported that parasociality can upend prejudice and stereotypes in viewers which enables these individuals to reach out to a more diverse group of people. Readers and viewers who may have previously limited themselves to a preferred group will be more open and willing to reach out to others. Communication with stigmatized groups is bolstered by parasociality, leading to more social interactions. This is exemplified by a study done by Bond (2020) who found heterosexual people were less biased against gay people after forming parasocial bonds with gay television characters over time. Interacting with fictional characters broadens perspectives in real life akin to interacting with people from different lifestyles and cultures. The availability and accessibility of different types of characters allows viewers and readers to question their implicit biases

in a more relaxed, one-sided interaction. This makes people more open to understanding other types of characters and, in turn, other types of people, tying into my previous point about increased empathy. Open-mindedness and inclusivity initiated by parasociality sparks more positive communication between diverse groups of people.

Parasociality Increases Intelligence

Parasocial bonding offers an avenue for people to familiarize themselves with more social situations and meanings. Dill-Shackleford et al. (2016) concluded that narratives improved social awareness. Stories can be thought of as “rehearsals for life,” as four of the five areas active when engaging with stories are also active in social situations (Dill-Shackleford et al., 2016, p. 635). This makes sense because people are cumulatively developing a personal connection with characters in film and television that parallels real life despite its one-sided nature. As they continue to react to a character's actions and thoughts, it is akin to the person themselves traversing social situations. People who are better versed in how to react to a variety of situations are better able to address them in real life. In this way, bonding with fictional characters offers a simulation of real life that improves one's social intelligence.

Parasocial phenomena improve cognition, specifically by increasing fluid intelligence. Dill-Shackleford et al. (2016) state that processing fictional narrative is a method of honing social, cognitive, and emotional skills that allow people to better interpret the thoughts of others, potentially due to the mirror neuron system in the brain. The mirror neuron system operates so the same neurons fire whether one is doing or observing an activity. As stated earlier, this

can lead to increased empathy. However, it can also teach humans how to act in situations we have observed but never personally experienced. Fluid intelligence is a dynamic ability that is characterized by using past information to dictate future behavior as a result of the present situation. As people who engage in parasociality are more socially aware and emotionally in touch with themselves and others, they must also have higher levels of fluid intelligence. This makes these viewers and readers more adaptable and flexible. Parasociality leads to increased fluid intelligence, thereby positively impacting adult cognition.

Parasociality is Affected by the Identities and Motives of Viewers and Readers

Parasocial phenomena are closely intertwined with the attachment styles of people engaging with the content. Attachment theory is the concept that relationships with a child's parental figures affect the formation of relationships with people in their adult lives. Two main forms of inadequate attachment are anxiety and avoidance. Anxiously attached people are hyper-focused on their relationships while avoidantly attached people suppress the formation of close relationships in favor of a more isolated lifestyle. Rain and Mar (2021) found that those with anxious or avoidant attachment styles bond preferentially with certain characters. Those with avoidant attachment styles are somewhat more likely to bond with more independent characters. As a character has greater ability to make their own decisions, avoidant people may relate and identify with this independence and self-sufficiency. Those with anxious attachment styles are more likely to bond with a character with high sociotropy, opposite to those with avoidant attachment

styles. This may be because anxiously attached individuals may feel more secure and calm when the character prioritizes relationships over themselves. Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011) suggested that anxious attachment styles are related to stronger parasociality. Therefore, people who are more influenced by their attachment style may be more inclined to form parasocial bonds differing in frequency or intensity. In this way, attachment styles affect how some people derive comfort and companionship from characters through parasociality.

The personality of viewers and readers adds a dimension to the intensity and effects of parasociality. People's personality and upbringing also affect the characters they gravitate towards. In audiovisual media, Liebers and Schramm (2019) found that those who are shy, more neurotic, and less agreeable may form stronger parasocial bonds. This could be because parasociality plays a larger role in these people's lives, making them more reliant on interaction with a character. Another reason behind this would be that these individuals spend more time and energy befriending these characters, forging stronger parasocial phenomena. Similar to those with the anxious attachment style, people with a desire for social control were more likely to form parasociality bonds (Tsay & Bodine, 2012). Parasociality may be comforting for individuals with these traits because bonds with characters are one-sided, reliable, and stable. Ingram and Luckett (2019) found that viewers who were extroverted had stronger bonds with characters from Harry Potter films. This opposes the idea that those who are socially deprived or lonely are most likely to befriend characters. Instead, this suggests that forming parasocial bonds with characters is a helpful and personal experience for a wide variety of individuals, regardless of introversion or extraversion. Furthermore, personality traits change what one reaps from their parasocial

bond with a character. Open individuals who watched and read the Harry Potter series were likely to take guidance from characters (Ingram & Luckett, 2019). Agreeable individuals are more familiar with their favorite characters, look to them for guidance, and crave a more personal relationship, potentially because of their increased empathy (Ingram & Luckett, 2019). This supports that not only does the type of person change the intensity of the parasociality, but it also affects the different effects of parasociality outlined by Tsay and Bodine (2012). As such, temperament and personality plays a role in the variation seen in parasociality and its effects.

The reason behind engaging with the content changes the strength and results of parasociality. Engagement is a prerequisite for PSI; passive engagement with the characters does not facilitate bonding. People who engaged with the content for "arousal...companionship and...habit" also were more likely to take advice from characters (Ingram & Luckett, 2019, p. 16). People who read for company were likely to tap into all aspects of parasociality (Ingram & Luckett, 2019). Those who read to relax tended to be knowledgeable about the characters. As viewing was more long-term and active, people were more likely to be influenced by characters (Tsay & Bodine, 2012; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). Additionally, individuals with meaningful reasons for engaging with fictional characters are more likely to form parasocial bonds that are stronger (Tsay & Bodine, 2012). Therefore, just watching television or passively reading a novel does not predispose individuals to the positive effects of parasociality previously described. Instead, people must be engaged with the character and be able to learn, thoughtfully reflect, or engage in introspection during the interaction. Assimilation and adoption of norms in character groups was also

noticeable in avid readers and watchers of content (Ingram & Luckett, 2019). Superficially, this seems obvious—people who are more interested and enthusiastic are more affected by parasociality. However, this means that these people conformed to norms presented in the content and were more receptive to the effects of parasociality, all as a result of their attitude towards the content. The motive behind befriending characters and consuming content shapes the effects of parasociality, where individuals with strong, meaningful motives are more likely to form and be positively impacted by parasocial interactions.

Parasocial Breakups

There exists a dark side to parasocial phenomena—parasocial breakups. As people form stronger bonds with characters, they think about the characters even when they are not interacting with content. Breaking strong parasocial bonds has negative effects on people consuming the content. Lacalle et al. (2021) state that people may experience feelings of grief after losing a character in a show or missing the relationship with a character after a show finishes. In this way, losing a character can cause someone anguish and loneliness as they mourn a character that was only alive through fictional narrative. Additionally, Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011) state that temporary, unprecedented as well as permanent breaks in PSRs can negatively impact people's behavior and emotions, often intensified by stronger parasocial bonds. There could be traumatic long-term effects for people who rely on parasociality as precious relationships, or even their only relationships. I can vouch for individuals who can feel depressed or lonely after losing a character, especially for novels like *The Book Thief* and movies like *47 Meters Down*. I remember feeling distraught after I realized Ram died in the historical film *Sita Ramam*

or Aunt May died in the action-packed movie *Spider-Man: No Way Home*.

However, the fear of parasocial breakup should not stop an individual from fully reaping the benefits of engaging and befriending characters of a story. Loss is unavoidable in real life, so learning how to cope with losing a friend in fiction may provide some secondary gains. Learning about how I react to the deaths of fictional friends taught me a lot about myself, allowing me to be better aware of how I handle similar situations in real life. Breakups with characters may even help consumers of content realize the gravity behind parasociality and draw more attention to carefully deciding what shows to watch or books to read. Although parasocial breakups negatively affect viewers in the short-term, the long-term benefits of parasociality make bonding with characters a worthwhile and meaningful experience.

Parasocial Phenomena Negatively Affect Readers due to Harmful Ideals Promoted by Some Fictional Narratives

Some people disagree and disqualify the positive effects of parasociality described above. Just as forming relationships can prime readers to obtain a greater depth of knowledge, they can also lead readers astray. Dill-Shackleford et al. (2016) includes that narratives can display excessive violence, sexual behavior, objectification, and victimization. Hepola (2014) further states that the negative effects of narrative have been recognized in the past through the implementation of book bans and censorship of literature. Readers and viewers may accidentally adopt or normalize immoral views or expectations from these works.

Those who bond with nonconformist characters may be socially alienated. Since the breadth of media is increasing daily, this increases the accessibility of books presenting content that may not be age or content appropriate. Lacalle et al. (2021), however, also bring up how literature and media can promote conformity. Although this may seem like parasocial phenomena erode a person's individuality, this does not account for the effects of adopting positive ideologies and guidance from characters. Clearly, parasociality can allow for readers and viewers to adopt beliefs that are viewed by society as either detrimental or beneficial. Therefore, this objection is more relevant to content differences of fictional narratives instead of the parasocial phenomena experienced.

Parasociality with Villainous Characters or Anti-Heroes can Negatively Affect Readers

One might object here that people can bond with villains and negatively coded characters, making these parasocial bonds detrimental. Specifically, Keen (2011) claims an increase in empathy for a character may have repercussions, like if a reader empathizes with a sinister character. However, this does not take into account the reason why a viewer or reader may bond with a character. For example, many people have befriended Loki, an anti-hero present in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. People may not gravitate towards Loki because he is a villain, but because of his redeeming qualities such as his mischievous nature and humor. The development and impact of parasociality is further mediated by the attributes of characters. Tsay and Bodine (2012), Liebers and Schramm (2019), Lacalle et al. (2021),

and Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011) described how characters that are more attractive, friendly, similar, and predictable may be more enticing to an audience member. Just as people gravitate towards people they relate to and share life experiences with, this may also dictate what characters are more appealing or likable to readers and viewers (Bahns et al., 2017). Therefore, if one does end up bonding with a character who is not strictly a positive role model, it may be because they relate with the character or focus on their likable virtues. Therefore, the parasocial bond formed may, in fact, positively influence the reader and viewer through the many avenues stated previously.

Parasociality Leads to Self-Deprecating and Negative Social Behaviors in Readers

Some believe that viewers can form detrimental relationships with one another and develop negative perceptions of themselves as a result of parasociality. Tsay and Bodine (2012) include that people who share a relationship with a character may feel jealous of each other. This may be because people are possessive of their relationship with a character. However, as mentioned previously, parasociality has significant prosocial qualities that override this concern. Viewers and readers are connected through their relationships with other characters in online communities and real life. Therefore, parasociality inspires discourse that can make people feel a sense of belonging with others they relate to. Liebers and Schramm (2019) acknowledge that viewers and readers can feel isolated as a result of engaging with fictional narrative, because parasociality may lead viewers to struggle with beauty standards or media addiction. Parasociality

can lead to insecurities in readers and viewers, but it allows for many viewers and readers to derive guidance and companionship from the media. In this way, parasociality may play a role in revealing these hidden concerns instead of triggering or exacerbating one's negative self-image. Furthermore, narratives can develop skills including confidence and compassion, so most viewers and readers actually feel supported and empowered by parasociality (Dill-Shackleford et al., 2016). Media addiction is a valid issue, but is not specific to parasociality. Fictional narratives are ubiquitous in society, so those combating the dangers of media addiction should be concerned with raising awareness about healthy media consumption instead of discouraging engagement with narratives and parasociality altogether. Commonly considered drawbacks of parasociality, such as isolation and jealousy, do not outweigh the benefits and improvements initiated by parasocial phenomena.

Conclusion

The entertainment industry continues to show impressive growth as people consume media from places like movies, novels, and television shows. Every day, consumers wait for creators to develop stories of fictional characters who become some of our closest confidantes. Bonding with fictional characters significantly affects the mindsets of audience members, allowing this cultural conversation to be viewed through a psychological lens. This specific lens focuses on people's behavior, perspective, and personality traits.

Parasociality with characters in fictional narratives positively impacts people's actions and mindset. Parasocial phenomena attack biases and stereotypical perceptions of individuals, encourage prosocial behavior, and improve intelligence.

Although parasociality leads to informed and inclusive attitudes overall, bonding with characters is individualized. Parasocial phenomena are impacted by each person's temperament and motivations behind engaging with content. Some dispute or minimize the impact of parasociality because of repercussions associated with parasocial breakups, viewing negative content, bonding with villainous characters, and experiencing negative emotions from engaging with the fictional narrative. However, these views do not recognize the potential for meaningful benefits as people interact with characters, making parasociality a net positive experience.

There is more nuance to the discussion of parasociality because of its versatility and applicability to many individuals. It would be fruitless to fully explore all aspects of this conversation. Stories change perspectives and spark imagination; however, this is all a function of how absorbed the person is into a story. With successful immersion, fiction leads to greater empathy and social support, even after adjusting for confounding factors like gender, age, and personality (Dill-Shackleford et al., 2016). Greater immersion and stronger relationships with characters leads to stronger effects of narrative. This makes sense because the more a person is transported into the fictional narrative, the stronger the parasocial phenomena and resulting effects. Liebers and Schramm (2019) found that the lifestyle, culture, and relationship status of viewers can lead to more complicated effects. Similarly, Keen (2011) argues one's empathy to characters and emotional stimulation are affected by age, gender, class, development, heredity, experience, personality, and culture, thereby changing their likelihood of forming parasocial bonds. This evidence further emphasizes the role of the individual in the formation of these interactions. Lacalle et al.

(2021) documented that people are more likely to form bonds with characters in long-term narratives, and these bonds vary based on genre. They also found that women are more likely to form parasocial bonds (Lacalle et al., 2021). Women were more emotionally invested in parasociality but not as negatively affected by parasocial breakups according to Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011). This may be because they were more adept at finding alternative social outlets and relying on other relationships. Ingram and Lockett (2019) reported varied effects of parasociality for readers and viewers of Harry Potter. Parasociality in books can quell anxiety and loneliness yet serve a social purpose in movies, appealing to different people. The effects of modality are interesting because they suggest engaging with cartoons, books, and dramas in a print versus online format have distinct yet significant effects on human psychology. These dimensions narrow the scope of the positive effects of parasociality by acknowledging other factors of the discussion that should be explored further.

In spite of the plethora of available research, some argue that parasocial phenomena have not been appropriately studied, and no reliable conclusions can be drawn about the subject. Parasociality must be operationalized and its dimensions standardized because it is inconsistently classified and measured in empirical research. Over 20% of the articles Liebers and Schramm (2019) studied recorded quantitative data on parasociality using flexible and individualized scales, like Tsay and Bodine (2012), making it difficult to compare results. Furthermore, previous researchers used nonrepresentational convenience samples or employed surveys that cannot establish causation. For example, although Tsay and Bodine (2012) collected a large quantity of data, their conclusions are not generalizable to all adults because their sample was composed of majority white and

majority female American college students chosen from fan sites or social media. Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011) and Hoewe et al. (2020) only sampled college students. Overall, research in parasociality has shortcomings because of its reliance on flawed sampling techniques and lack of a standardized approach to quantifying these bonds. To make conclusions for a larger global audience, researchers should standardize parasociality parameters and broaden their samples to account for the diversity of viewers and readers. Despite this, Liebers and Schramm (2019) drew from 261 studies to supply a cumulative review of research specific to the types of characters, methods of data collection, and widespread trends. As they were able to establish general trends and offer a credible review of research, this opposes the prospect that parasociality cannot be explored to develop meaningful conclusions. A valuable next step would be to make narrower conclusions for specific categories of audience members.

Overall, prosocial relationships with fictional characters have significant positive effects on people, and specific attributes of people and characters play a role in these effects. Characters can persuade people to vote or befriend members of an outgroup, indicative of changes in behavior in viewers and readers. As people bond with characters, they may become primed to act in a certain way about significant decisions. Media characters can serve an implicit social purpose beyond entertainment or companionship. Creators and audience members should be aware of the potential effects of these bonds. Impressionable young adults should be educated to identify these influences, as relationships with characters can encourage people to make significant decisions and impact their outlook on life. Parasocial phenomena are a tool that can be used to produce positive effects in audiences and discovering what narrative conditions

maximize positive parasociality should be a priority for future research.

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