



Parasocial Relationships and Their Impact on the Psychological and Sociocultural Adjustment of Educational Tourists: An Autoethnography

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Adjustment of Educational Tourists: An Autoethnography**

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Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes

Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this article is to investigate whether relationships with media figures can impact the psychological and sociocultural adjustment of educational tourists.

Design/methodology/approach - The article uses the qualitative method of autoethnography to provide a highly personalized account of the author's relationships with podcast hosts during his time as an educational tourist, in order to fulfill its previously mentioned purpose.

Findings – An analysis of the author's narrative account demonstrates how he formed parasocial relationships with his favourite podcast hosts. These relationships increased self-efficacy, reduced stress and provided a sense of social support, which, in turn contributed to psychological and sociocultural adjustment.

Originality/value – By demonstrating how relationships with media figures can impact their psychological and sociocultural adjustment, the article argues that research on educational tourists should explore their parasocial relationships in addition to their other kinds of friendships which have already been examined.

Keywords: Autoethnography, parasocial relationships, podcasts, educational tourists, adjustment

Introduction

I vividly remember finishing my first shop at the university supermarket and returning to my new room with my father and sister who were helping me to prepare for my new life on campus. They helped me un-pack, and, before I knew it, it was time for them to go. As we said our goodbyes, I was nervous but trying to play it cool. I waved to them from my window, and watched them gradually disappear into the distance. For the next few minutes, I sat on my un-made bed with a feeling that is difficult to describe to those who have not experienced it for themselves. Furnham and Tresize (1983) suggest that there are three types of problems facing international students: problems of living in a foreign culture, problems of young adults asserting their emotional and intellectual independence and academic problems associated with higher educational study. The feeling of claustrophobia I felt as I looked around the empty room was most likely a combination of these three types of problems I instinctively knew I might have to face. I have never forgotten this feeling, and years later, it has prompted me to write an autoethnography about my experience of being an educational tourist.

Literature Review

Educational tourism has been studied as part of tourism research since the 1990s (Tomasi *et al.*, 2020) and refers to a type of tourism where the traveller's primary or secondary objective is learning (Ritchie, 2003). As highlighted by the Canadian Tourism Commission (2001), educational tourism can be viewed along a continuum ranging from general interest learning while travelling on one end, to purposeful learning and travel on the other. The type of educational tourism which I embarked upon was 'education first' tourism, which refers to instances where the primary objective of travel is learning (Ritchie, 2003). This type of educational tourism can encompass all international students who travel abroad, with their

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2
3 experience in the host country characterising a core element of their education (Ezel and Arasli,
4
5 2021).
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8 Adjustment is a transitional process that unfolds over time as educational tourists learn to
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10 cope with their new environments (Al-Sharideh and Goe, 1998). It can be divided into
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12 psychological and sociocultural adjustment (Ward and Kennedy, 1999). Psychological
13
14 adjustment refers to emotional and affective responses (including a sense of well-being and self-
15
16 esteem) whilst sociocultural adjustment refers to behavioural responses relating to how
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18 effectively one links to the new society that they find themselves in (including competence in
19
20 managing tasks required for daily intercultural living) (Ward *et al.*, 2001).
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24 In their systematic review of 64 articles which examined the predictors of international
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26 undergraduate and graduate students' adjustment to the United States, Zhang and Goodson
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28 (2011) found that stress, social support, English proficiency, length of residence in the United
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30 States, acculturation and personality were the six most frequently reported predictors of
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32 psychological symptoms (which indicated negative psychological adjustment). Educational
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34 tourists with higher stress levels had more psychological symptoms, whereas those with greater
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36 social support and (self-assessed) English proficiency, longer stays in the United States, more
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38 identification with its culture and a clear sense of their own values, goals, and capabilities had
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40 fewer psychological symptoms (Zhang and Goodson, 2011). The six most frequently reported
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42 predictors of sociocultural adjustment were English proficiency, social contact with Americans,
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44 acculturation, length of residence in the United States, region and self-efficacy (Zhang and
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46 Goodson, 2011). Educational tourists with more (self-assessed) English proficiency, contact with
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48 Americans, identification with local culture and extended stays in the country had better
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50 sociocultural adjustment. In terms of region, European and South American students adjusted
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3 better than Asian students (Zhang and Goodson, 2011) and in terms of self-efficacy, educational
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5 tourists with higher belief in their capability to organize and execute courses of action required to
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7 fulfill specific goals (Bandura, 1997) experienced better sociocultural adjustment. Out of all of
8
9 the predictors mentioned above, this autoethnography is particularly interested in stress, self-
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11 efficacy and social support, as well as, how my relationship with podcast hosts affected them.
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15 During my time as an educational tourist, I listened to a lot of podcasts, which are digital
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17 audio or video files that can be downloaded to a desktop computer, iPod, or other portable media
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19 devices for playback whenever and wherever the user desires (McClung and Johnson, 2010). As
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21 a result of my high podcast consumption, my favourite hosts accompanied me when I was riding
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23 my bike to university, working-out, having a shower, doing laundry and lying in bed trying to
24
25 fall asleep.
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29 As time passed, I became more and more familiar with them and they started feeling like my
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31 friends. One day I purchased a dietary supplement recommended by one of the hosts, but when
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33 my parents asked me questions about the product, I couldn't provide them with the answers they
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35 were seeking because I hadn't done my research. I had simply purchased the product because I
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37 trusted the host. If he said that it would help strengthen my immune system, then that is what he
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39 believed. My friend was knowledgeable, honest and surely he wouldn't be out to trick me? When
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41 my parents questioned the host, it felt like they were disapproving of a friend.
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45 When Bochner *et al.* (1977) analyzed the friendship networks of educational tourists they
46
47 distilled them into three distinct categories. Co-national ties were friendships with people from
48
49 the same home country, host-national ties were friendships with people from the country of study
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51 and international ties were friendships with other international students (Bochner *et al.*, 1977).
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55 Whilst numerous scholars have investigated the face-to-face friendships of international students
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3 (Furnham and Alibhai, 1985; Hendrickson *et al.*, 2011; Mrekajova, 2017; Rienties and Nolan,
4 2014) and some have turned their attention to their interpersonal mediated friendships (Forbush
5 and Foucault-Welles, 2016; Hamid *et al.*, 2016; Li and Peng, 2019), their friendships with media
6 figures have yet to be considered.
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12 The feeling that certain media figures are your friend has been researched extensively
13 under the concept of parasocial relationships (PSRs), which can be traced back to Horton and
14 Wohl (1956) who used it to describe one-sided communication between audience members and
15 characters they were in contact with via different forms of media such as radio and television.
16 PSRs are by definition one sided, because whilst the media figure's action is observed by the
17 media user, the media user's reaction cannot be observed by the media figure (Schramm and
18 Hartmann, 2008). They are also enduring and long-term as they extend beyond a media exposure
19 situation and are based on repeated encounters (Dibble *et al.*, 2016) like a friendship that exists
20 between two people beyond their face-to-face communication sequences (Schramm and
21 Hartmann, 2008).
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35 Whilst the main difference between PSRs and interpersonal relationships (whether
36 mediated or face-to-face) is the lack of reciprocity in PSRs, research has shown that they do have
37 similarities which demonstrate that it would be wrong to assume that they are incomparable. In
38 both types of relationships greater intimacy, understanding and appreciation is developed for the
39 other person as uncertainty is reduced (Horton and Wohl, 1956). In other words, in both types of
40 relationships, as an individual is exposed to a person more frequently and over a longer period of
41 time, they develop more confidence in their attribution of how the person will behave and there
42 is less uncertainty in the relationship (Eyal and Cohen, 2006). Both parasocially and in real-life,
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3 putting forth time and commitment leads to an increased connection with the person whom one
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5 is in a relationship with (Eyal and Dailey, 2012).
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8 **Method**

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10 The purpose of this article is to use the qualitative method of autoethnography, to
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12 provide a highly personalized account of my relationships with podcast hosts, during my time as
13
14 an educational tourist, in order to consider whether relationships with media figures can impact
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16 the adjustment of educational tourists.
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19 As a qualitative method, autoethnography is both process and product (Hughes and
20
21 Pennington, 2017). It seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience
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23 (auto) in order to understand larger cultural phenomena (ethno) (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). My decision
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25 to carry out autoethnographic research, stemmed from wanting to examine my own personal
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27 experiences as well as the larger cultural phenomenon (Adams *et al.*, 2015) of being an
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29 educational tourist in order to contribute to existing theory and research (Dhoest, 2014).
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33 Behind this article lies the assumption that stories are important for us because human
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35 beings are fundamentally story telling creatures and are, in fact, the only storytellers we know
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37 (Fisher, 1985). However, as suggested by Dhoest (2014) the observations and life stories
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39 revealed in this text, are not presented in isolation but are connected to theory and research.
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42 As highlighted by Ellis *et al.* (2011) there are different forms of autoethnographies and
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44 this one takes the form of a personal narrative. Authors of personal narratives see themselves as
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46 the phenomenon and write evocative accounts of stories from their own academic and/or
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48 personal lives (Ellis *et al.*, 2011) as is done in the following section of this article.
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Data Collection & Analysis

The data used in this study was collected by reflecting on my memories as an educational tourist in the United Kingdom. The period of study for my undergraduate degree spanned from 2013 to 2016, whilst my pursuit of a PhD commenced in 2020 and is still ongoing.

In order to remember the details of different events from my life, I utilized the process of emotional recall (Ellis, 1999), to imagine going back to different moments both physically and emotionally. I went through sessions of thinking chronologically about my most relevant experiences (Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022) as an educational tourist and podcast enthusiast. During these reflections, I was particularly interested in identifying what Denzin (1989) refers to as epiphanies, which are intense situations whose effects, memories, images and feelings linger long after the incident itself is over (Bochner, 1984). Writing down my recollections from these moments, served as my primary method of inquiry (Poulos, 2021). When writing I used thick descriptions to dig beneath surface-level observations and insert commentary, context and interpretation to different events (Poulos, 2021). This was also a way of achieving external validity, by ensuring that the experiences were defined in sufficient detail for the reader to determine the extent of transferability to other times, settings, situations and people (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Whilst telling my story I relied on an evocative and reflexive narrative (Ellis *et al.*, 2011) which was written in my home over a number of days. The only editing carried out after the narrative account was completed, consisted of correcting grammar or spelling mistakes, as well as switching the positioning of certain passages in order to produce a more accurate timeline of events. The narrative account was concluded when I could not think of any other experiences relating to the purpose of the autoethnography.

Inspired by Castiello-Gutiérrez (2022), I present the narrative which was produced in the manner outlined above as the findings of this study. In the discussion section I then bring together the findings and previous literature to comment on whether there is value in considering PSRs in future research on educational tourists and adjustment.

Positionality

When considering my positionality in this study, I realize that I am, at the same time, both an insider and an outsider. My position as an insider stems from the fact that, as stated earlier, I completed my undergraduate degree in the United Kingdom which is also where I am currently pursuing my PhD. This is a place which is very different from the small island of Cyprus where I grew-up and considered home. At times, I have faced some of the problems that are common amongst educational tourists and found it difficult to adjust.

However, that being said, it would also be remiss of me to ignore my position as an outsider insofar as being a specialist in Media and Communications. This vantage point has allowed me to be familiar with different theories and research that makes it possible for me to look back at my relationships with podcast hosts with greater theoretical insight and understanding. Hence whilst writing about the PSRs of educational tourists, I take the position of both a participant and a storyteller with the goal of sharing my personal narrative by unfolding genuine and vivid stories of living and studying in a foreign country (Koo and Mathies, 2022).

Findings

Arriving in a new place with no social contacts is a daunting experience, and my first week on campus was particularly lonely. Classes hadn't started yet, because I had arrived early which also meant that I didn't see any other students in the corridor of my dormitory. As a result, I spent a lot of time alone in my room staring at the screen of one device or another. Seeing

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2
3 pictures of friends and family members on social media going to picnics, camping and
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5 celebrating birthdays only made things worse. However, on this particular afternoon I couldn't
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7 stop scrolling down my feed, until I came across some videos showing the preparation of meals
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9 each looking more delicious than its predecessor. No more time to wallow in self-pity, because
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11 now I was hungry and had to go shopping as I had nothing left to eat. As I walked through the
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13 rain towards a supermarket, I couldn't help but wonder if I had made a mistake by coming here
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15 to study. The contrast between my social life now and back home was stark and I wasn't
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17 enjoying my newly found solitude. The laughing friend group that walked past me looking
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19 excited about the night that they had planned only added insult to injury. I pulled out my
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21 telephone from my pocket and raised my headphones to cover my ears. As I selected a podcast to
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23 play, I felt a sense of gratitude towards my favourite hosts who accompanied me in moments
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25 such as these. Whilst listening to their conversations, I felt like I was right there with them or
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27 they were right here with me. Either way, they provided a sense of companionship and made me
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29 feel less lonely...
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36 When classes finally commenced, I attended a number of introductory courses and met
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38 with my academic advisor. Unfortunately, soon after that doubts started to creep in. Did my
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40 academic background adequately prepare me for this new undertaking? Did I have the research
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42 skills that my degree would require and would the difference between the education system here
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44 and back home be too great for me to overcome? As I tried to wind down after coming back
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46 from the library, questions such as these would not stop playing in my head. If this continued,
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48 they would accompany me to the gym and later prevent me from falling asleep. Luckily, I knew
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50 something that would help. At times like these, listening to the conversations of my favourite
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52 podcast hosts provided me with a welcome distraction from the things that were causing me
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3 stress and anxiety. By losing myself in interesting discussions, I was able to temporarily forget
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5 about academic or non-academic worries, which had the potential of negatively affecting my
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7 mental wellbeing if dwelt on for a long enough period of time. I pressed play and started
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10 listening to the last episode I had downloaded...
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12 Later that week the university's social clubs set-up stands in the middle of the main
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14 square on campus. As I walked amongst them, two caught my eye. However, I was nervous
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16 about going to speak with their representatives, so I walked straight past them. Before I could get
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18 too far, I had a change of heart. I remembered listening to the stories told by my favourite
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20 podcast hosts, who described getting out of their comfort zones in order to travel the world alone
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22 or move to a new city to pursue a dream. Like me, they too lacked confidence, doubted their
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24 capabilities and felt like outsiders. However, this did not stop them from facing their fears and
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26 overcoming temporary discomfort. I remembered their explicit encouragement to be more
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28 adventurous and not to be paralyzed by the fear of making mistakes, which were ultimately
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30 unavoidable. I walked up to the stands and joined the clubs, without knowing that I would meet
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32 someone who would later become my best friend.
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37 As time passed, my social interactions increased; however, this brought along a different
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39 set of problems, because unlike my favourite podcast hosts, the people I was hanging out with
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41 were quite different to me. The podcast hosts were people who didn't view the world as black
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43 and white. They were open to all sorts of different perspectives and ideas. When joking around,
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45 they thought that no topic was off-limits and it was clear that their jokes came from a place of
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47 love rather than hate or malice. Unlike the podcast hosts, most of the people I had formed
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49 relationships with were not very open to different ideas. When I tried to bring contrasting
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51 perspectives to the table during some of our discussions, they were quick to dismiss them.
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3 Unfortunately (for both me and them), my sense of humour was also not very appreciated.

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5 Regardless of the intention, situation, timing and context they thought that some topics should
6
7 never be joked about. I did not agree. The end result of these differences and others was a
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9 negative effect on my psychological well-being, which, after a while, the podcasts I listened to
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11 managed to improve. My relationships with the hosts led to an epiphany that even though they
12
13 weren't currently around me, people who shared my sense of humour, values and approach to
14
15 life did exist. In turn, this epiphany helped me to recognize that the feeling of being an outsider
16
17 who didn't belong would be temporary, as sooner or later I would meet people who I had more
18
19 in common with. Luckily this realisation would later turn out to be true...

23 24 **Discussion**

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26 Whilst previous research has found that television viewers receive social support from
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28 characters they are in a PSR with (Thomas, 2021), that there are positive correlations between
29
30 parasocial attachments to Virtual Youtubers and stress relief (Tan, 2023), and that PSRs with
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32 weight loss spokespeople are associated with higher self-efficacy regarding diet and exercise
33
34 (Phua, 2016), these studies were not specifically concerned with educational tourists.

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36 Conversely, whilst Zhang and Goodson's (2011) systematic review which found that social
37
38 support, stress and self-efficacy can all play a role in adjustment was concerned with educational
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40 tourists, it did not provide insight into whether or not relationships with media figures can help
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42 provide them. My narrative account manages to build a bridge between these two strands of
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44 research, by presenting an example of how educational tourists can have PSRs with their
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46 favourite podcast hosts, as well as, how these relationships can help their adjustment as a result
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48 of providing them with social support, reduced stress and increased self-efficacy.
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3 As highlighted in the narrative account, listening to the podcasts of hosts I was in a PSR
4 with, reduced my stress by distracting me from academic and non-academic worries. They also
5 provided me with social support in a number of different ways. When I was lonely as a result of
6 not having any social contacts after first moving to the United Kingdom, the hosts gave me
7 comfort and a sense of companionship. When I later gained new social contacts but did not feel a
8 strong connection to them because of our differences, they managed to eradicate my feeling that
9 I was an outsider who did not belong. Together with decreased stress, the feelings of comfort,
10 companionship and belonging provided by my relationships with the hosts helped my
11 psychological adjustment by protecting my self-esteem and sense of well-being (Ward *et al.*,
12 2001). My relationships with the hosts also increased my self-efficacy. The knowledge of how
13 they handled difficult situations and their explicit encouragement to be more adventurous
14 provided me with motivation to get out of my comfort zone. Therefore, the increase in my self-
15 efficacy helped my sociocultural adjustment by affecting my behavioral responses which helped
16 me to link more efficiently to the new society I found myself in (Ward *et al.*, 2001).
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35 When taken together, the findings of this study suggest that there is value in research on
36 educational tourism exploring the PSRs of international students. Therefore, I argue that
37 parasocial friendships should be added to Bochner *et al.*'s (1977) classification of the types of
38 friendships that educational tourists can be in. If the PSRs of educational tourists are also
39 considered as a type of friendship, future studies could investigate other ways in which they
40 might help the adjustment of educational tourists, in addition to reducing their stress, providing
41 them with social support and increasing self-efficacy.
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3 It would also be intriguing to establish whether PSRs are most common with co-national,
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5 host national or international media figures. Research suggests that educational tourists lean
6
7 towards co-national interpersonal friendships(Bochner *et al.*, 1977; Furnham and Alibhai, 1985;
8
9 Mrekajova, 2017) and their challenges in establishing relationships outside of their own ethnic
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11 community are well documented (Ward *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, it would be interesting to
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13 examine whether their parasocial friendships mirror the patterns of their interpersonal
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15 friendships.
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19 In addition, future research could also focus on whether PSRs with host national or
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21 international media figures could help educational tourists establish interpersonal relationships
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23 with people outside of their own ethnic community. This might play out in a number of different
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25 ways such as by helping them to familiarize themselves with the host culture and thereby
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27 reducing any distress caused by culture shock (Ward *et al.*, 2001), by helping them to overcome
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29 the language barrier (Khawaja *et al.*, 2017) or by providing a type of e-contact that could help
30
31 reduce intergroup prejudice (White *et al.*, 2020) that could be preventing the establishment of
32
33 certain friendships.
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37 Whilst the effects of PSRs with podcast hosts described in my narrative account were
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39 overwhelmingly positive it would also be useful to examine how PSRs might negatively affect
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41 the adjustment of educational tourists if they become a substitute for autonomous social
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43 participation or they become dysfunctional if viewed in a manner that defies objective reality
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45 (Hartmann, 2016).
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48 49 **Limitations**

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51 As is the case with all research, this article also has its limitations. One such limitation is
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53 the impossibility of recalling or reporting events in a language that exactly represents how they
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were lived and felt (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). Because the human memory is fallible, the author acknowledges that people who experience the same event can end-up telling different stories about what actually happened (Tullis Owen *et al.*, 2009). However, even though stories can and do change over time, autoethnographers should strive to make their narrative accounts probable, trustworthy and resonant (Adams *et al.*, 2015). In order to do this, whilst writing this article, I refrained from taking literary license (Ellis *et al.*, 2011) with the hope of creating a more interesting story at the expense of a truthful account of events.

Because, as stated in the method section of this article, autoethnographies focus on the intentions, motivations, emotions, and actions of individuals, the insights produced from my narrative account cannot be generalized to other educational tourists. However, when taken in conjunction with previous research, there is a strong argument for future research on educational tourism to include PSRs as a type of friendship that should be examined.

Conclusion

In line with the purpose of this article, which was to investigate whether relationships with media figures can impact the adjustment of educational tourists, my narrative account provided an example of how PSRs with podcast hosts increased my self-efficacy, reduced my stress and provided a sense of social support, which in turn contributed to my psychological and sociocultural adjustment. As a result, the article argues that research on educational tourists should explore their parasocial relationships in addition to other kinds of friendships which have already been examined. The fact that existing research has overlooked these types of relationships may be preventing us from obtaining a more complete understanding of the educational tourist experience.

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3 This article has also tried to outline just a few of the many ways in which scholars could
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5 approach this potentially highly productive undertaking which could help provide valuable
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7 insight for governments, universities and educational tourists themselves, regarding how to help
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9 make adjustment a less turbulent process.
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