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Parasocial relationships, self-esteem, and identity formation in young adults

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Abstract

With the rise of digital media, the prevalence of parasocial relationships (PSRs) in young adults has increased, having potential implications for self-esteem and identity formation. This study examines the relationships among parasocial relationships, self-esteem, and identity formation in young adults aged 18–25 years. A quantitative correlational design was employed. The data were collected from 291 participants through standardized measures, including the Celebrity Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and the Social and Personal Identities Scale. Results indicated a significant negative relationship between parasocial relationships and self-esteem, as well as between parasocial relationships and identity formation. A significant positive relationship was established between self-esteem and identity formation. These findings suggest that higher parasocial engagement may be linked to lower self-esteem and less consolidated identity development. The study highlights the psychological relevance of mediated relationships in understanding youth development within the Indian context.

Keywords: Parasocial Relationships; Self-Esteem; Identity Formation; Young Adults

1. Introduction

Parasocial relationships refer to one-sided relationships between an individual and a media figure or persona, where the individual perceives a sense of connection or relationship with the media figure [1]. In current times, parasocial relationships are intensified by interactive digital platforms, which foster perceived intimacy and accessibility [2]. Empirical research demonstrates that parasocial engagement involves emotional investment, identification, and perceived relational closeness despite the absence of reciprocity [3,4]. In digital environments, repeated exposure and self-disclosure by influencers and media figures strengthen parasocial attachment, often leading followers to perceive media figures as meaningful social connections [5].

From a social cognitive perspective, individuals learn values, behaviors, and aspirations through observation of salient role models [6]. Media personalities frequently function as symbolic role models who embody aspirational lifestyles, career success, and relational norms. Such identification may contribute to motivational processes and identity exploration [7]. However, exposure to curated and idealized portrayals may also activate upward social comparison processes [8], which are consistently linked to lower self-esteem and affective well-being [9,10].

Self-esteem is defined as an individual's global evaluation of self-worth [11]. It plays a central role in psychological adjustment and identity processes. Longitudinal evidence indicates that self-esteem continues to develop across adolescence and emerging adulthood, gradually stabilizing as individuals consolidate social roles and commitments [12,13]. Sociometer Theory conceptualizes self-esteem as an internal gauge of perceived social inclusion and relational value [14,15]. In digital contexts characterized by public visibility and quantifiable feedback, self-esteem may become particularly sensitive to perceived validation and rejection [16].

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Research consistently demonstrates that frequent social comparison on social networking platforms is associated with lower self-esteem, particularly when comparisons are upward and appearance-focused [9,10]. At the same time, secure and stable self-esteem is associated with better emotional regulation, adaptive coping, and psychological well-being [17,18]. The relationship between self-esteem and identity formation is well established, with higher self-esteem generally associated with stronger identity commitment and stability, and lower self-esteem linked to identity diffusion [19,20].

Identity formation constitutes the central developmental task of adolescence and emerging adulthood [21]. During this stage, individuals negotiate educational trajectories, career decisions, intimate relationships, and broader social roles while constructing a coherent sense of self [21,22]. In current times, young adults undertake this developmental task within an increasingly digital and media-saturated environment. Social networking platforms, influencer culture, and constant online engagement have transformed the contexts in which social comparison, role modeling, and identity exploration occur [23,24].

Research linking parasocial relationships to identity formation remains relatively limited but offers important insights. Adolescents often perceive media figures as role models, with parasocial relationships contributing to identity exploration, indicating that individuals use these relationships to experiment with values, behaviours, and aspirations in a low-risk context [25]. It was further observed that individuals in earlier stages of identity development reported stronger identification with media figures, suggesting that parasocial engagement may play a role during periods of identity uncertainty [5].

Although extensive research has examined parasocial relationships, self-esteem, and identity formation independently, fewer studies have explored their associations within a unified developmental framework, especially in the Indian Context.

The current study aims to address this gap by examining how parasocial relationships are associated with self-esteem and identity formation in young adults. By integrating theories from developmental psychology, self-evaluation, and media psychology, this research offers a culturally relevant framework for understanding the psychological impact of mediated social bonds.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the relationship between parasocial relationships and self-esteem among young adults.
- To examine the relationship between parasocial relationships and identity formation among young adults.
- To examine the relationship between self-esteem and identity formation among young adults.

1.1. Hypotheses

- H₁: There is no significant relationship between Parasocial Relationships and Self-Esteem.
- H₂: There is no significant relationship between Parasocial Relationships and Identity Formation.
- H₃: There is no significant relationship between Self-Esteem and Identity Formation.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The study employed a quantitative, non-experimental, and correlational research design to examine the relationship between parasocial relationships, self-esteem, and identity formation.

2.2. Sample

The sample included 291 participants aged between 18 and 25 years from the Indian population. Convenience sampling was employed, where the participants were recruited online. Participation criteria included that the participants needed to be Indian nationals or long-time residents between the ages of 18 and 25 years, and active use of social media with at least one followed public media figure, such as a celebrity or influencer. Incomplete and inconsistent responses were not included in the final analysis.

2.3. Instruments

2.3.1. Celebrity–Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale:

The Celebrity–Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale (CPPI), developed by Bocarnea and Brown in 2007, measures the extent to which individuals form parasocial relationships with media figures. The scale consists of 20 Likert-type items rated on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. It assesses cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects of parasocial engagement, including perceived intimacy, emotional connection, and imagined interaction. Negatively worded items are reverse-scored, and higher scores indicate stronger parasocial interaction. The CPPI demonstrates satisfactory reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values typically ranging from .80 to .90, along with evidence of a largely unidimensional structure and good criterion-related validity [26].

2.3.2. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), developed by Rosenberg in 1965, is a 10-item self-report measure of global self-esteem. It includes both positively and negatively worded items rated on a 4-point Likert scale. Negatively worded items are reverse-scored, and total scores reflect overall self-worth, with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem. The scale conceptualizes self-esteem as a unidimensional construct and demonstrates strong reliability across populations, with internal consistency typically ranging from .77 to .90, along with established construct validity [11].

2.3.3. Social and Personal Identities Scale

The Social and Personal Identities Scale (SPIS), developed by Nario-Redmond et al. in 2004, assesses the importance of social and personal identity components in defining the self. The scale consists of 16 items rated on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from not at all important to extremely important. It measures the centrality of both social identity (e.g., group membership) and personal identity (e.g., individuality and independence). Higher scores indicate a greater identity centrality. The SPIS demonstrates acceptable reliability, with coefficients typically above .80, and factor analytic evidence supports its structure, along with established construct validity [27].

2.4. Procedure

An online survey was conducted through Google Forms to gather data. Study details were given to participants, and an informed consent form was signed. The questionnaire consisted of demographic information, then CPPI, then RSES, and lastly SPIS. The responses were anonymous and were securely stored to be analysed.

2.5. Statistical Analysis

The descriptive statistics were calculated to describe the characteristics of the participants and the variables of the study. The Shapiro-Wilk test revealed that there were violations of normality; thus, non-parametric statistical techniques were employed. Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to examine the strength and direction of the relationships between parasocial relationships, self-esteem, and identity formation. . All analyses were done in Jamovi with significance of $p < .05$.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to standard ethical guidelines for psychological research. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. No personally identifiable information was collected, and responses were recorded anonymously to ensure confidentiality. The data were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher and research supervisor. The study ensured that no harm or discomfort was caused to participants during the process.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the distributional characteristics of the study variables: Parasocial Relationships, Self-Esteem, and Identity Formation. The analysis was based on the data obtained from 291 participants, with complete responses for all variables. The mean, standard deviation, range, and normality test are presented in Table 1.

The results indicated that the mean score for Parasocial Relationship was $M = 60.50$ ($SD = 24.70$), suggesting a moderate level of parasocial engagement within the sample. The mean score for Self-Esteem was $M = 23.50$ ($SD = 7.25$), reflecting

moderate levels of global self-worth among participants. Identity Formation demonstrated a mean score of $M = 65.10$ ($SD = 32.40$), indicating moderate identity development overall.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Normality Tests for Study Variables (N=291)

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max	Shapiro-Wilk	p
PSR	60.50	24.70	20	97	0.911	< .001
SE	23.50	7.25	10	39	0.971	< .001
IF	65.10	32.40	20	139	0.919	< .001

Note: All p-values are based on the Shapiro–Wilk test for normality. $p < .05$ indicates a significant deviation from normality; PSR-Parasocial Relationships, SE-Self-Esteem, IF-Identity Formation

To assess the assumption of normality, the Shapiro–Wilk test was conducted for each variable. The results revealed significant deviations from normality for Parasocial Relationship ($W = 0.911, p < .001$), Self-Esteem ($W = 0.971, p < .001$), and Identity Formation ($W = 0.919, p < .001$). Since all p-values were below .05, the null hypothesis of normality was rejected for each variable.

Although the sample size ($N = 291$) is sufficiently large for the Central Limit Theorem [28] to mitigate moderate deviations from normality, the consistent significance of the Shapiro–Wilk tests suggested violation of the normality assumption. Therefore, Spearman’s rank-order correlation (ρ) was considered appropriate for examining associations among Parasocial Relationship, Self-Esteem, and Identity Formation in subsequent analyses.

3.2. Correlational Analysis

Since the data violated the assumption of normality, Spearman’s rank-order correlation (ρ) was used to examine the relationship between Parasocial Relationships (PSRs) and Self-Esteem. This non-parametric test was chosen because it measures the strength and direction of a monotonic relationship between two variables without assuming normality [28].

Table 2 Correlation between Parasocial Relationships and Self-Esteem

			PSR	SE
Spearman’s rho	PSR	ρ	1.000	- 0.364***
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
		N	291	291
	SE	P	- 0.364***	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
		N	291	291

Note: *** $p < .001$; PSR- Parasocial Relationships, SE- Self-Esteem

The results revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between parasocial relationships and self-esteem, Spearman’s $\rho = -0.364, p < .001$ ($df = 289$), indicating that higher parasocial engagement is associated with lower self-esteem. The coefficient reflects a moderate negative relationship, suggesting a consistent inverse pattern between the variables. The p-value less than .001 indicates that this relationship is unlikely to have occurred by chance and is statistically significant at $\alpha = .05$. This finding can be understood through the Social Compensation Hypothesis, which proposes that individuals with lower perceived relational competence may engage more in mediated connections [23].

Table 3 Correlation between Parasocial Relationships and Identity Formation

			PSR	IF
Spearman’s rho	PSR	ρ	1.000	- 0.174***
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000

		N	291	291
	IF	ρ	-0.174***	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
		N	291	291

Note: *** $p < .003$; PSR- Parasocial Relationships, IF- Identity Formation

The results revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between parasocial relationships and identity formation, Spearman's rho = -0.174 , $p = .003$ ($df = 289$), indicating that higher parasocial engagement is associated with lower identity formation. The coefficient reflects a small negative relationship, suggesting a modest but consistent inverse association between the variables. The p-value less than .001 indicates that this relationship is statistically significant at $\alpha = .05$. This finding can be understood through identity process theory, which emphasizes that identity development depends on active exploration and commitment in real-life contexts, and excessive parasocial engagement may shift this process toward mediated figures [29].

Table 4 Correlation between Self-Esteem and Identity Formation

			SE	IF
Spearman's rho	SE	ρ	1.000	-0.420***
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
		N	291	291
	IF	ρ	-0.420***	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
		N	291	291

Note: *** $p < .001$; SE- Self- Esteem; IF-Identity Formation

The results revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between self-esteem and identity formation, Spearman's rho = 0.420 , $p < .001$ ($df = 289$), indicating that higher self-esteem is associated with stronger identity formation. The coefficient reflects a moderate positive relationship, suggesting a meaningful and consistent association between the variables. The p-value of .003 indicates that this relationship is statistically significant at $\alpha = .05$. This finding can be understood through identity process theory, which suggests that identity development is supported by positive self-evaluation, facilitating exploration and commitment [29].

4. Discussion

The present study aims to examine the relationship between parasocial relationships, self-esteem, and identity formation among young adults.

The results indicated a significant negative relationship between parasocial relationships and self-esteem. This suggests that individuals who reported higher levels of parasocial engagement also tended to report lower self-esteem. This finding is consistent with previous research, which reported that engagement with idealized online content is associated with lower self-esteem [9,10]. While earlier work suggested that parasocial relationships may temporarily reduce self-discrepancy for individuals with low self-esteem, the present findings indicate that, overall, higher parasocial involvement may be linked with diminished self-worth [30].

A similar pattern was observed in relation to identity formation, with parasocial relationships showing a significant negative association. This suggests that greater engagement with media figures may be linked to lower levels of identity consolidation among young adults. Studies have highlighted the potential of parasocial relationships to support identity exploration [25]; the present findings suggest that this engagement may not always translate into stable identity development. Instead, it may contribute to confusion or reliance on externally defined standards, particularly when individuals engage uncritically with idealized representations.

The study found a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and identity formation. Individuals with higher self-esteem were more likely to report stronger identity development, which aligns with existing literature. Previous

studies have consistently shown that individuals with a well-developed sense of identity tend to have higher self-esteem, and vice versa.[19,20] This relationship may be explained by the fact that individuals with a stable sense of self are more confident in their beliefs and decisions, which in turn enhances their overall self-worth.

Taken together, the findings suggest that parasocial relationships, while often perceived as harmless or even beneficial, may have more complex implications for psychological development. While they may provide a sense of connection or temporary emotional comfort, higher levels of parasocial engagement appear to be associated with lower self-esteem and less developed identity among young adults in this study. This highlights the importance of understanding not just the presence of these relationships, but the extent and nature of engagement.

4.1. Implications

Research on parasocial relationships, self-esteem, and identity formation becomes increasingly relevant given the rapid rise of the internet and social media as facilitators of continuous interaction with media figures. As online platforms continue to facilitate frequent interaction with media figures, parasocial engagement has become a common experience among young adults. These interactions extend beyond simple media consumption and may influence how individuals perceive themselves, evaluate their self-worth, and develop their identity. These findings point to the need for promoting mindful media use, encouraging critical engagement with online content, and supporting self-esteem development through educational and mental health interventions.

4.2. Limitations

Certain limitations were recognized while conducting this study. There is limited research examining the combined relationship between parasocial relationships, self-esteem, and identity formation, particularly within the field of psychology and in the Indian context. The standardized scales used in the study were developed primarily within Western cultural frameworks, which may not fully capture the socio-cultural nuances relevant to Indian young adults. The use of a convenience sample and a cross-sectional design may restrict the generalizability of the findings and limit conclusions regarding causality.

5. Conclusion

The present study examines the relationship between parasocial relationships, self-esteem, and identity formation among young adults. The findings indicated that higher levels of parasocial engagement were associated with lower self-esteem and less developed identity formation, while self-esteem was positively related to identity development. These results highlight the complex role of parasocial relationships, suggesting that while they may offer a sense of connection, greater involvement may also be linked to less favourable psychological outcomes. Overall, the findings point towards the need to better understand how everyday digital experiences shape internal psychological processes and underscore the importance of fostering more balanced and reflective media engagement among young adults.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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