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### Title

Like, Comment, Subscribe: The Role of YouTube in Identity Development

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## Abstract

## **Introduction**

Online media usage and sharing has continued to be prevalent in the day-to-day lives of the average person. According to a recent Pew Research Study, the video sharing website YouTube is one of the most utilized online platforms to date and roughly 73% of adults have reported using the website (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). YouTube's reach exceeds more in just entertainment, as people use YouTube for educational purposes, learning how to do things that they haven't done before, or even to form opinions on purchasing a product (Smith, Toor & Van Kessel, 2018). It is through watching this variety of content that a relationship may form between the content creator – or the YouTuber – and the viewer. These parasocial relationships that form can be a great benefit to the YouTuber and may even be imperative for a YouTuber to form some type of connection with their audience.

In January 2018, Logan Paul published a controversial viral video of an apparent suicide committed in the Aokigahara Forest of Japan, and was removed from YouTube's Google Preferred Program – a program that allows advertising and marketing companies to place their ads on highly viewed videos in order for their product to reach a wide audience. According to an article by Forbes regarding the top grossing YouTubers of 2018, his, along with the loss of brand deals and de-monetization on older videos caused a significant hit, but 'loyal fans kept his hefty merchandise business afloat' and ensuring his spot on the list at number ten with an estimated amount of earnings of \$14.5 million (Robehmed & Berg, 2018). If viewership loyalty and the parasocial bond formed between the viewers and Logan Paul was so strong that even such a controversial video would not deter them from supporting him, there is a question being asked of what and how do these fans view themselves in relation to Logan Paul.

Simultaneously, how do viewers perceive themselves in relation to these YouTubers? Do they view themselves as only viewers and therefore no responsibility towards defending the actions of the YouTuber in question? Do they view themselves as loyal fans that would support the YouTuber whether that be through financial means or through social means, or even physically taking action to support them? Does the viewer even perceive themselves as being more than just a fan, or someone that the YouTuber could form a bond with that exceeds the line between fan and 'celebrity'? Though there have been studies that looked at the parasocial relationships that form between YouTubers and viewers from a marketing standpoint (Chen, 2016; Ferchaud, Grzeslo, Orme, & LaGroue, 2018; Munnukka, Maity, Reinikainen, & Luomahaaho, 2019), there has not been much insight into how does these parasocial relationships affect the viewers' perception of themselves and the development of their identity.

However, there have been studies looking at the effect of parasocial relationships between celebrities. One such article by Stever (2011) applied developmental theories to fan behaviors and the formation of parasocial relationships, proposing the idea that parasocial relationships are formed and maintained through proximity seeking behaviors and exists as a chain of stimulus, response, and reinforcement according to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Stever, 2011). According to Stever (2011), fans seek out parasocial relationships with celebrities to fulfill psychosocial needs, though the intensity of the relationship and the involvement of the fan in that relationship may vary from person to person; more information on what leads to those intense psychosocial needs that may cause more problematic interactions between the fan and the celebrity such as stalking or violent behaviors is still needed. Another study investigated the influence of mass media (and more specifically, the parasocial relationships that form through mass media) on adolescent development. Giles and Maltby (2004) found that there was both a

positive and negative correlation with autonomous behaviors and parasocial relationships. Participants that found themselves separating from their parents, celebrities often take that role that parents once fulfilled. Because of that, the function of parasocial relationships seemed to act as the adolescent's extended social network to facilitate conversation, rather than as someone that the adolescent could form a type of connection with and have some influence on the development of the adolescent's identity. Finding out to what extent do these parasocial relationships have on the development on identity may be beneficial to the literature by giving the reasoning as to why some fans or viewers might behave in response to the YouTuber they have formed a strong bond with.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Seventeen participants were recruited through the researcher's own social network. Out of the seventeen participants that responded to participate in the study, thirteen participants (12 women, 1 non-binary,  $M_{age} = 21$  years, age range: 18-24 years) responded and filled out the consent form as well as supplied contact information to be interviewed. Initially, participants under the age of 18 were considered to be a part of this study, as more often than not, the younger teen audiences are more drawn to YouTubers than they are to the more traditional celebrity due to valuing the "realness" and "more engaging behavior" that YouTubers present (Dewey, 2014). However, due to time constraints, this age range was not selected for the current research but will be further explored in future research. Participants older than the age of 24 were also excluded from the research due to wanting the participants to reflect on their usage of YouTube during their teenager years to better assess whether or not the parasocial relationships formed had any impact on identity development. Since the platform was created in 2005 and

established itself as a community different from other video streaming platforms at the time (Graham, 2005), it would give a big enough window for participants that are currently between the ages of 18 to 24 years of age to have had the opportunity to use YouTube during some point in their adolescence (13 to 17 years of age from 2005 to 2019). In terms of ethnicity, participants that identified themselves as White (31%) were the majority, followed by equal percentages of participants that identified themselves as either being African-American (23%), Hispanic (23%) or Asian (23%).

## **Materials and Procedures**

To find out if there was any correlation between how people use YouTube and parasocial relationship strength, a 5-point Likert scale was adapted from Khan's (2017) Motives for YouTube Consumption and Participation. The factors selected from this scale were 'Seeking Information', 'Social Interaction' and 'Relaxing Entertainment'. Participants were given statements that corresponded to these three factors (i.e. the statement "I watch YouTube to learn how to do things" corresponding with 'Seeking Information', the statement "I watch YouTube to feel like I belong to a community" corresponding with 'Social Interaction', etc.) and were asked to rate how closely they felt these statements resembled their YouTube watching habits from 1 meaning 'not at all/not like me' to 5 meaning 'very much like me'.

Although there have been scales created to measure parasocial interaction between participants and celebrities, there has not been one created to measure parasocial interaction between participants and YouTubers. As such, the interview questions asked during the process of the study were based off of existing parasocial interaction scales (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008) or of celebrity worship (Mccutcheon, Lange & Houran, 2002). Aspects taken from scales such as these included cognitive/perceptual (i.e. if the participant could picture becoming friends

with this YouTuber or sharing similar traits with this YouTuber), social (i.e. if the participant interacted with the YouTuber through comments or liking, or shared information about the YouTuber to friends as though they were a part of an extended social network) and physical (i.e. the participant feeling a desire to meet the YouTuber personality in person as well as making physical purchases of any endorsements the YouTuber may give). The responses given to the questions were then scored on either a '+1', a '+2' or a '-1', before they are then added all together to calculate the final parasocial score. Participants that achieved a score of 20 or higher were coded to have a high parasocial strength with the YouTubers that they frequently watch, whereas participants that scored lower than 20 were coded to have less of a parasocial attachment to the YouTubers that they frequently watch.

The interview also consisted of asking participants about their usual YouTube watching habits and what type of content do they regularly watch on YouTube. Other questions such as opinions about the type of YouTube content that the participant both watches and does not watch, perceptions about what personality traits would make one be considered a 'popular' YouTuber, as well as introspective questions about the participant's shyness and belief that they could form a bond with the YouTubers they spoke about, were also asked.

When filling out the consent forms, participants agreed to have their interview conducted through either a phone call or through an alternative measure (LINE, FaceTime, Skype, text message, or list an alternative). Participants that agreed to have their interview through a phone call were recorded and the responses were transcribed. Three participants conducted their interview face to face with the researcher and were also audio recorded. Two participants agreed to a text message for their interview, and all responses were transcribed.



## Results

Out of the total thirteen participants, seven participants were analyzed as having high parasocial scores while six participants had low parasocial scores. Between these two groups, a majority of the participants that had a high parasocial score was below the age of 21. Meanwhile, for participants that had low parasocial scores, the average age was on the higher end of the age range at 23 to 24 years of age. This might suggest that participants that are younger are more likely to form stronger parasocial relationships with YouTubers. However, due to there being outliers in both groups, as well as working with a small sample size, the findings cannot be generalized to everyone and further research must be conducted with a bigger selection of participants to test whether or not this hypothesis is true.

In terms of comparing responses between participants that achieved a high parasocial score versus participants that achieved a low parasocial score (see Table 2), High PSS participants were more likely to watch YouTube for more hours than do the ones that do not form parasocial relationships. This finding is consistent with the current literature in that the more often one familiarized themselves with the person they are forming a parasocial bond with, the easier and stronger the bond is (Stever, 2011). High PSS scorers also were more likely on average to use YouTube socially in their day to day lives (“I watch YouTube to feel like I belong to a community”, “I watch YouTube to connect with others who share some of my values”) in comparison to the Low PSS participants. Participants were asked if they considered themselves to be shy; only three participants identified themselves as being shy or as not having what they deemed to be the right personality in order to become a YouTuber. Interestingly, Low PSS participants utilized YouTube for informational purposes on average more than the High PSS

group. However, the differences between these two means was small (see Table 1), possibly due to the sample size.

Table 1

*Parameter Means for High and Low PSS*

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Info					
High PSS	7	2.8	1.4	.35	.73
Low PSS	6	3.0	.55		
Social					
High PSS	7	2.6	1.1	-1.58	.14
Low PSS	6	1.7	.75		
Relax					
High PSS	7	4.1	.50	.25	.80
Low PSS	6	4.2	.62		

Lastly, when asking the question of whether YouTube and the parasocial relationships formed between the viewers and the YouTubers, there was not a visibly significant impact the parasocial relationships had on the development of the participant’s identities. Rather, though there were participants that felt inspired and influenced by the behaviors and personality of the YouTubers that they watch and applied the mannerisms to their own day-to-day interactions, it was only three out of the seven High PSS participants that reported these types of sentiments, less than half. Therefore, while the participants had reported positive influences of the parasocial interaction on their own identity development, the findings are too slim to generalize the implications of parasocial relationships on identity development of others. More research would

be needed with a bigger population size in order to see if the effects are similar and can be generalized.

Table 2

*Examples of Social, Physical and Perceptual Measure Responses for a Weak and Strong Parasocial Score*

	Weak	Strong
Social		
<i>“Do you recommend other people to this YouTuber?”</i>	“No, I’ll just share a video or something like that”	“Yeah, I do [recommend Shane Dawson] daily”
Physical		
<i>“If [YouTuber] was at an accessible location, would you try to make the effort to go out and meet them?”</i>	“I don’t know. I think I wouldn’t because I don’t want to disturb them or anything”	“I don’t know what I would say if I ever met [Shane Dawson] but I would still want to meet him so yeah, I’d definitely try and go
Perceptual		
<i>“If given the time and opportunity, do you think you can for a bond with [YouTuber]?”</i>	“I don’t know them personally so, yeah. I see [YouTubers] as content creators and that’s really about it”	“...I would be comfortable meeting [The Try Guys] because they’re not one to judge anyone by anything really...so, I feel like I’ll be able to make a bond with them just because of who they are”

*Note:* Social parameter involved questions that asked if participant shared this YouTuber's videos with friends, if the participant commented on the YouTuber's videos, etc. The physical parameter involved questions that asked if participants would be willing to meet this YouTuber face to face or if the participant bought any product from the YouTuber. The perceptual parameter involved questions that asked if the participant felt they shared traits with the YouTuber they watched, if they could form a bond with the YouTuber, etc.

### **Discussion**

The results of the study found that participants that were on the younger end of the spectrum of the age range (i.e., 18, 19, 20) were more likely to form a strong parasocial relationship compared to the participants that were on the opposite end of the age spectrum (i.e. 23, 24) for the selected sample. However, there were outliers in both groups; one participant who was 19 years of age achieved a parasocial score of 0, while another participant that was 24 achieved a parasocial score of 25, one of two participants that obtained the highest score available (the other participant being 20 years of age).

A reason for this discrepancy may lie in how each of the participants utilized YouTube. Participants that formed strong parasocial relationships and achieved high PSS with the YouTubers that they frequently watch are more likely to use YouTube for social purposes rather than informational purposes like those that scored a low PSS. This finding coincides with the current literature's findings on motivations of compulsive YouTube use. Participants that were motivated to use YouTube for informational and learning purposes were less inclined to be compulsive users of YouTube (Klobas, McGill, Moghavvemi, & Paramanathan, 2018). In addition to that, participants that were considered to be more compulsive users found themselves more often than not being distracted from seeking information by watching linked videos or

videos recommended by the YouTuber algorithm, further perpetuating the user's involvement in YouTube. Simultaneously in literature relating to parasocial relationships developing between viewers and TV personalities, Tsay and Bodine (2012) found that those who watched TV to relax were more likely to seek out and desire face-to-face interaction with the personality as well as perceive the interaction as close.

Although a majority of participants that scored a high PSS did not perceive themselves as having a relationship more intimate than fan and content creator, participants still perceived themselves as having a deeper insight into the YouTuber's life by following multiple accounts across different social media platforms and interacting with the YouTuber whether that be through comments or through sharing the YouTuber's videos. This suggests that those that use YouTube as a means to relax and for entertainment purposes may develop stronger parasocial relationships due their frequent usage.

Participants were assessed on their shyness to find a possible connection with shyness causing participants to develop more parasocial relationships. Correa, Hinsely, and Gil de Zúñiga (2009) found that people who used social media were more often than not extroverted, contrasting previous literature that suggested that introverted people used social media as a means of escaping real-life anxieties and isolation in the real world (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017; Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimmons, 2002). However, these results were in part due to the absence of anonymity in social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter. When looking at using YouTube, there is a small allowance of anonymity to users that can hide behind a username and an icon without themselves needing to produce content that would allow someone to discern their personality. This is reflected somewhat in participant's reluctance to picture themselves as being a YouTuber, with some making comments that they do not believe that they have the

proper personality or that they are reluctant to show the more nuanced aspects of their life through the camera.

A personality trait that does seem to have some effect on the development of parasocial relationships would appear to be neuroticism, according to the current literature. Neuroticism is closely connected to the compulsive usage of social media according to Hughes, Rowe, Batey, and Lee (2012). Guandagno, Okdie, and Eno (2008) found that those that were high in neuroticism as well as high in openness to new experiences were more likely to be bloggers. Hamid, Ishak, and Syamsul (2015) found that YouTube as well as Facebook has a direct positive effect on neuroticism due to the effects of feedback and commenting culture on YouTube that could make one feel anxious and upset and lower one's self-esteem. While in the study a majority of participants stated they were shy, there was no measurement of neuroticism to see if that was a possible third variable in the development of parasocial relationships. More research would be needed to see if there is a type of personality that facilitates the development of parasocial relationships, including neurotic individuals as well as seeing if other personality traits factor into the equation.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There were limitations with the study. Firstly, the selection of participants was predominantly college-aged females. This sample selection both creates an interesting conversation as well as hinders the development of the current understanding of parasocial relationships and social media use. While YouTube was considered predominately male in terms of viewership and time spent watching the website (Blattberg, 2015), not many males that were approached by the researcher offered their perspective on YouTube as well as a possible parasocial relationship formed between themselves and the YouTuber. In fact, majority of males

that were approached to participate in the study claimed that they do not watch YouTube and instead watch Twitch. Twitch is an online video sharing platform like YouTube, with the only difference being that Twitch is more heavily focused around the culture of video game streaming and gamers rather than YouTube and its eclectic amount of videos. Streamers on Twitch as well as video gamers on YouTube are primarily male, as well as the viewers. Only two female participants mentioned in the study that they watch video game playthroughs; however, one participant watches a group of people play games (*Stumpt*) where there is one female among three males, while the other participant watches walkthroughs centered around *Spyro the Dragon*, where there is no audio or presentation of the gamer to discern their identity let alone their gender. This would be interesting for future research to see whether gender may play a role into the development of parasocial relationships. A majority of the female participants indeed listed male YouTubers as their most watched and most attached YouTuber personality (such as Shane Dawson, James Charles, Gigguk, Mother's Basement, etc.), so whether that be if female participants develop a stronger parasocial bond to opposite-sex YouTubers or if male viewers find it easier to develop a parasocial bond with someone of the same sex, would be an interesting observation. Furthermore, though sexuality was not incorporated into the study, one participant was able to develop a strong parasocial bond with Shane Dawson due to feeling the solidarity of being a bisexual person. Like seeing if the YouTuber's gender has any effect on the strength or development of a parasocial relationship, sexuality would also be an interesting variable due to not much research about it.

The sample size is very small and therefore, the results found were not significant. A larger sampling pool is needed to see if the trends that did appear in the study such as a younger age meaning the quicker onset of a parasocial relationship, so that we may be able to generalize

it to a larger populace outside of the college aged females. Though we have found interesting results from doing the interviews and different perspectives for each one, it was admittedly difficult for the researcher to find participants that had the time for an interview or was intimidated by speaking over the phone with someone. Using a different measure like a survey or a self-report might not be as intimidating to participants like a one-one-one interview and generate more interest while simultaneously more participants that could fill out the survey at a convenient time.

As previously mentioned, even though some participants felt that the relationship between themselves and the YouTuber did not exceed past fan and content creator, there was still a perception of closeness and intimacy at seeing aspects of the YouTuber that the participants themselves did not believe they would find in their YouTube videos. Something of note is that a majority of the participants that had a high PSS score frequently reported following their favorite YouTuber on Instagram compared to other social media websites such as Twitter or Facebook. This may be in part to the visual aspects both Instagram and YouTube shares, as found in a study conducted by Blight, Ruppel and Schoenbauer (2017). The results found in their study on social motivations and parasocial relationships formed through Twitter and Instagram feeds found that participants that used Instagram had a greater sense of community as well as a higher parasocial relationship, formulated by the visual stimulus of images depicting everyday life as eliciting stronger emotional responses and the chance for followers to connect with each other and Instagram influencers (Blight, Ruppel and Schoenbauer, 2017). Likewise, with YouTube's visuals and the sense of interaction and community garnered by fans that support the YouTuber, interact with the YouTuber as well as interact with each other throughout the comments, Instagram and YouTube share a similar environment when it comes to parasocial relationships.



More research into both platforms on the development of parasocial relationships – in both how the use of both the platforms in conjunction with one influencer may facilitate a stronger parasocial relationship, or if the differing mediums that are utilized on both platforms (Instagram for video and photos, YouTube for videos) would lead to varying parasocial strengths – would be needed to compare the results and further examine the connection.

Lastly, to understand further how the impact of YouTube has on the development of identity, a larger age range should be examined for future studies. For this study, the intention was to gather participants that were between the ages of 12 to 18 to see both the current interests' adolescents have for YouTube content or creators, as well as seeing how adolescents form parasocial relationships with YouTubers in comparison to older participants. There are few studies involving the impact of YouTube and parasocial relationships in regard to adolescents. One study by Jiménez and Vozmediano (2018) found that adolescents were more likely to seek out content that instructs them to learn and educate themselves rather than content that may be considered humorous or dangerous to the viewer. However, according to Jiménez and Vozmediano (2018) there is not much user interaction that occurs in this category of YouTube videos. This is consistent with the findings in this study regarding the low PSS viewing educational videos more than entertainment videos.

Furthermore, another category brought up by Jiménez and Vozmediano (2018) as a frequently watched topic by teenagers is videos about sex, whether that be sexuality, education about sexual wellbeing, or stories about surviving rape and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. Sexuality and the expression of sexuality in regard to adolescents' and social media is prominent in the current literature. One study by Morris and Anderson (2015) analyzed vlogs from YouTubers Charlie McDonnell (*Charlieissocoollike*), Dan Howell (*Danisnotonfire*), and

Jack and Finn Harries (*JacksGap*) and the positive influence their softer portrayal of masculinity has on their youthful audience, garnering support from both young females as well as promoting a friendlier masculinity. As mentioned, a participant found comfort in her own sexuality after watching and developing a parasocial bond with YouTuber Shane Dawson. According to Ridder and Bauwel (2015), YouTube is a platform where queer-identifying youths can both tell their own stories of coming out and expressing their sexuality as well as connecting to other queer YouTube creators and comparing their stories to other adolescents. This kind of action has the potential to facilitate parasocial bonds not only formed through YouTubers and their viewers, but also the parasocial relationships that form by connecting with other users centered around the topic of sexuality. Examining the relationship that a YouTuber's sexual identity may have on the development of identity – both personality and sexual identity – may give further insight into this phenomenon. Seeing also if there is an impact of the type of masculinity portrayed by male YouTubers to their female audience in how parasocial relationships are developed and maintained will also benefit the research.

The future research should focus on how to bring these facets of a parasocial relationship and see if there is an effect on identity formation through the literature available today. As YouTube and similarly other social media platforms continue to grow in viewership and content creators, people are exposed to these influencers more often than one would normally spend time with someone. These parasocial relationships and how people connect to one another needs to continue being studied, and from there gain a better understanding of how people are able to come together and connect and develop a relationship, even if one of the pairs is in a different country far away.

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