The Journal of Social Media in Society
Spring 2024, Vol. 13, No. 1, Page 27-52
thejsms.org

"I Learned It From Watching YOU!": Parasocial Relationships with YouTubers and Self-Efficacy

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The aim of this research was to examine the effect that parasocial relationships with lifestyle YouTubers may have on viewers' level of self-efficacy. The primary research objectives were to determine: (a) if parasocial relationships are being formed with lifestyle YouTubers, (b) how do those relationships affect the self-efficacy of audience members when it comes to lifestyle changes, and (c) what other factors might affect self-efficacy. A survey (N = 424) was used to examine the effect that parasocial relationships with lifestyle YouTubers have on self-efficacy. Primary results indicate that parasocial relationships with lifestyle YouTubers significantly influence an increase in self-efficacy in audience members ($p < .001$), and the amount of cumulative weekly viewing hours of lifestyle YouTubers' videos marginally predicted levels of self-efficacy ($p = .058$). From these results, we theorize that parasocial relationships with YouTubers may take place primarily through "imagined interactions" (Honeycutt, 2003).

Keywords: parasocial relationships, self-efficacy, imagined interactions, survey, social media, YouTube

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The past decade has seen an exponential increase in the proliferation of user-created videos on social media platforms such as YouTube. Many of these "YouTubers" amass hundreds of thousands to millions of regular viewers. Social media provides individuals with a convenient and readily accessible means to fulfill their innate longing for connection and community. This is achieved by affording individuals effortless entry into global virtual communities and facilitating interaction with like-minded individuals, as exemplified by the development of shared interest groups through YouTube's comment sections. While the relationship between media such as television and parasocial relationships has been extensively explored, literature examining parasocial relationships specifically with YouTubers is still being developed (Alperstein, 2019; Kurtin et al., 2018; Liebers & Schramm, 2019; Rasmussen, 2018).

This study used questionnaire-based methodology to examine the effect that parasocial relationships with lifestyle YouTubers have on self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as "the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes" (Bandura, 1977, p. 193). The primary research objectives were to determine: (a) if parasocial relationships are being formed with lifestyle YouTubers, (b) how do those relationships effect the self-efficacy of audience members when it comes to lifestyle changes, and (c) what other factors, such as frequency and duration of exposure to chosen YouTubers, gender, and other demographics might affect self-efficacy. The primary results of this study indicate that parasocial relationships with YouTubers significantly influence an increase in self-efficacy in audience members.

LITERATURE REVIEW

History and Overview

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are one-sided relationships that an audience develops with a persona (celebrity, actor, character, etc.) (Horton & Wohl, 1956). These personas can be fictional or existing persons, ranging from television or comic book characters to a local news anchor or a national politician. It should be noted that much of the existing parasocial relationship (PSR) research stems from Parasocial Interaction (PSI) research, causing some confusion between the two constructs. While PSIs and PSRs are connected, they are two different constructs; there have been issues over time in the literature separating the two terms (Giles, 2002). While some studies fail to define the two clearly, others use the names of the constructs interchangeably (Giles, 2002). A PSI should be distinctly defined as a one-sided experience an audience member has with a persona *during* the actual media exposure; a PSR is an ongoing one-sided relationship that the audience member has with the persona that occurs *during and after* the media exposure (Caughey, 1984; Giles, 2002; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016).

Parasocial Relationships and Television. The first study to focus on parasocial relationships (PSRs) examined the relationship between audience members and fictional television, movie, and radio characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Horton and Wohl characterized parasocial interactions as being persona controlled — in other words, the

persona is in "control" of the interaction, even though it is a one-sided experience by the audience member, and the relationship cannot be reciprocated from the persona. PSRs are typically experienced as effortless, with no sense of obligation; therefore, the viewer can choose to withdraw from this relationship at any time. From the audience perspective, Horton and Wohl found that the interaction was experienced more as a face-to-face interaction, rather than a passive observation, which increased the intensity of the interaction as a whole. Regarding PSRs, audience members frequently viewed their chosen personae as a friend, counselor, or role model. Audience members also viewed the parasocial relationship as being stronger when they also viewed the personae being reliable – meaning that the character, show, celebrity, politician, or influencer is consistent in character traits and is typically predictable and on a set schedule for airing and posting content (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Decades later, other scholars continued this line of research by examining whether parasocial interactions occurred between audience members and television newscasters (Rubin et al., 1985), television viewing exposure and satisfaction (Perse & Rubin, 1988), whether a persona breaking the "fourth wall" influenced PSI (Auter, 1992), and eventually a multidimensional scale of parasocial interaction — the Audience-Persona Interaction (API) Scale – was developed (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000). Significant findings from these foundational studies on television and parasocial interactions included a positive correlation between instrumental television use, news viewing levels, viewing news for exciting entertainment, and parasocial interaction (Rubin et al., 1985), that audience activity played a mediating role in media effects, which lead to the claim that audience members have an active role in media use (Perse & Rubin, 1988), and culminated in the development of a multidimensional scale of parasocial interaction — Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) Audience-Persona Interaction (API) Scale.

Notably, Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) API Scale was the first statistically valid and reliable scale to successfully measure all the dimensions of PSI predicted by previous researchers (e.g., Horton & Wohl, 1956). The four factors used in this scale were: (a) identification with a favorite character, (b) interest in a favorite character, (c) group identification/interaction, and (d) favorite character's problem-solving ability. The final 4-factor API Scale explained 49.4% of the total variance, lending strong support to suggest

that this API Scale was a reliable measure of the construct of parasocial interaction.

Parasocial Relationships vs Interpersonal Relationships. Perse and Rubin (1989) looked at the similarities and differences of parasocial relationships and interpersonal relationships and examined this from an interpersonal attribution perspective. Results from Perse and Rubin's study illustrated that audience members tend to extend their interpersonal construct systems to help them form impressions of television personae. Not only did these audience members live vicariously through the viewed persona, but they also typically thought that the persona had some similarities to those in their social circles. Thus, suggesting that some individuals perceive parasocial relationships as safe – and perhaps even safer than interpersonal relationships due to PSRs being reliable, discrete, and uncritical. Perse and Rubin (1989) concluded that an interpersonal framework worked when discussing and analyzing parasocial relationships.

Likewise, Cohen (2004) evaluated the similarities parasocial relationships have to interpersonal relationships. Cohen looked at television viewers with different attachment styles (secure, avoidant, and anxious) to determine if the participants, with different attachment styles, would react differently when they were expected to lose a favorite character. Cohen found that those with an anxious attachment style were more likely to have distress over the loss of a favorite character than any other attachment style. Additionally, there was a strong correlation between PSI and distress over the loss of a favorite character; because of this, Cohen (2004) argued that PSRs are more similar to existing interpersonal relationships and may be used as a coping mechanism for loneliness. Cohen also suggested that individuals who struggle with creating strong interpersonal relationships may also struggle with creating PSRs.

Lifestyle "YouTubers"

Content creators on YouTube often specialize or focus on a specific category of content in an effort to draw in viewers. One such category is the "lifestyle" category which includes lifestyle-related content such as daily life activities and hobbies such as fashion, beauty, health, wellness, travel, cooking, home and family, etc. (Newton, 2023). A person who creates "lifestyle" videos on YouTube for public consumption by others is colloquially referred to as a "Lifestyle YouTuber". Some examples of successful Lifestyle YouTubers includes: @AmberScholl (3.66 million subscribers), @Gabi_DeMartino (3.11 million

subscribers), @DoItOnaDime (2.28 million subscribers), @lavendaire (2.18 million subscribers), @itsJudysLife (1.84 million subscribers), @fakhrakhanum (1.68 million subscribers), and @SarahsDay (1.55 million subscribers).

Recent studies on YouTubers and parasocial relationships show significant support that parasocial relationships are being formed (Kurtin et al., 2018; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Rasmussen, 2018), and Baek et al.'s (2013) findings suggest that the formation of these parasocial relationships may have a positive effect on audience member's well-being. Van Zandvoort et al. (2009) found that individuals with role models had a higher acceptance of themselves, lived a lifestyle closer to their goals, and made their chosen lifestyle a priority. Having a reliable role model can result in an increased self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). Seeing a role model's successful ability to complete a task can increase the self-efficacy of an individual regarding that task (Bandura). Previous studies have shown that a main component in the development of a parasocial relationship is the level and amount of exposure to the media being examined (Kurtin et al., 2018; Rubin & Step, 2000; Tian & Yoo, 2014).

Parasocial Relationships and YouTube

One qualitative in-depth interview study (Chen, 2016) examined how parasocial interaction developed through YouTube between both YouTubers and their audience members. Chen focused primarily on the formation of parasocial relationships through digital self-construction, digital self-presentation, and PSRs via digital self-images. Results from Chen's study suggest that YouTube provides a digital space where both audience members and persona can purposefully set out to create and maintain parasocial relationships. Another similar study (Rasmussen, 2018) found that "beauty YouTuber" celebrities who used YouTube to interact with audience members (e.g., replies, "likes", or other such interactions) were likely to have audience members develop a parasocial relationship with their persona through increased feelings of familiarity.

Furthermore, Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) found that the positioning of a persona's body to the perspective of the audience member can also encourage the formation of PSRs. While perceived attractiveness was the most significant factor Hartmann and Goldhoorn's study found to affect the development of a PSR, the position of the body was also found to be significant. In line with previous studies (Auter, 1992; Auter

& Davis, 1991) that found that personae who break the fourth wall were rated as more entertaining and cognitively stimulating by audience members than those who did not break the fourth wall. Likewise, Hartmann and Goldhoorn found that when a YouTuber addressed the audience verbally while facing the camera, the audience member reported feeling more connected to the persona, and consequently developed a stronger parasocial relationship.

Kurtin et al. (2018) continued this line of research into the development of parasocial relationships on YouTube, and concluded that, similar to other media, parasocial relationships were in fact being formed via YouTube. Kurtin et al. found that three primary factors were significantly relevant in the formation of PSRs through YouTube: (a) exposure, (b) social attraction, and (c) physical attraction. Results showed that exposure to the YouTuber was significant in the building of PSRs, but social and physical attraction were even more significant determinants of whether a PSR would develop, which aligns with the results of Rubin and McHugh's (1987) study. Kurtin et al. found that both social and physical attraction to the YouTuber were positively correlated with exposure, and also correlated with the importance of having a parasocial relationship with a YouTuber. These studies reinforce the idea that YouTube can serve as a hub for the development of parasocial relationships.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, a concept that evolved from Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory, looks at how the environment of an individual affects their motivation, learning, and self-regulation behaviors. An individual who has high self-efficacy believes in their ability to successfully accomplish a task using a specific skillset. The psychological construct of self-efficacy reflects an individual's perception of their own competence and mastery in navigating challenges and achieving success in various domains of life. It encompasses the confidence and judgment individuals possess regarding their ability to exert control over their own actions, persist in the face of adversity, and adapt to changing circumstances while pursuing their objectives (Bandura, 1977).

Role Models & Self-Efficacy

According to Bandura (1977; 1994), in order for an individual to be motivated to emulate another's behavior, it is essential to first observe the model demonstrating the

behavior to be emulated, followed by the retention of the observed action, then the individual must possess motivation to replicate the behavior, and lastly the actual duplication of the behavior. Bandura's initial studies on self-efficacy focused on the participants' beliefs in themselves overcoming a phobia. Since then, studies on self-efficacy have expanded into many other areas, including the development of self-efficacy itself. Bandura (1994) found that the more relatable an individual believed a role model to be, the more that role model affected the level of self-efficacy of that individual. Essentially, the success and failures of the role model reflected what the individual believed they could accomplish. The chosen role models were successful in raising the individual's levels of self-efficacy because they were seen as sharing knowledge and teaching the skills needed to accomplish a goal or task (Bandura, 1994).

The concept of a role model, as defined by Bandura (1994), stands as a distinct and well-defined construct within the realm of social psychology, notably differing from both parasocial relationships and imaginary social relationships (Gleason, 2013). A role model is an individual who serves as a source of inspiration or emulation due to their exemplary behavior, achievements, or qualities (Morgenroth et al., 2015). Role models are typically tangible figures in a community, such as a mentor, a successful professional, or a family member, and they are consciously chosen by individuals for their aspirational characteristics. This is in contrast to the aforementioned parasocial relationships, which are the imagined connections established with media personalities, celebrities, or fictional characters through one-sided interactions, such as television or social media (e.g., Horton & Wohl, 1956; Perse & Rubin, 1989). However, parasocial relationships lack the personal agency involved in selecting a role model, and they often entail a sense of pseudo-intimacy. Hence, it is worth considering whether exposure to content presented by a YouTuber that is perceived as a role model can potentially elevate an individual's self-efficacy levels.

Four Primary Sources of Self-Efficacy. Bandura (1997) discusses four primary sources that influence an individual's belief in their ability to achieve a specific task or goal. These sources include (a) mastery experiences, which stem from past successful performance; (b) vicarious experiences, where observing others' achievements or failures shapes one's self-efficacy; (c) verbal persuasion, involving feedback and encouragement from others; and (d) physiological and emotional states, where one's emotional and

physical reactions during task execution impact their self-efficacy appraisal. These sources collectively contribute to the development and maintenance of an individual's self-efficacy beliefs about themselves, playing a pivotal role in motivation, behavior, and achievement (Bandura, 1997). The present study aims to investigate the impact of "vicarious experiences" on an individual's self-efficacy levels. Specifically, to explore the notion that observing a YouTuber whom an individual identifies as a role model successfully completing a task may have a significant influence on that individual's confidence in their own capacity to achieve similar goals.

Self-efficacy and Social Media. A study by Hu et al. (2018) examined the role self-efficacy may have in developing cultural intelligence through social media usage. Individuals are motivated to use social media for many different purposes, and two primary purposes include information seeking and building and maintaining relationships (Hu et al., 2018). Hu et al. found that social media use allowed individuals to meet their emotional needs as well as find solutions to problems, and concluded that self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between social media usage and cultural intelligence, suggesting that those with low levels of self-efficacy may struggle to adapt to new environments. However, parasocial relationships extend beyond mere information seeking or transient emotions; they possess a deeper and more complex nature.

In the context of YouTube and its influence on self-efficacy, existing research in this area predominantly focuses on two aspects: (a) the self-efficacy of individuals who create and share videos on the platform, and (b) the impact of YouTubers on consumer purchasing decisions through advertising and sponsorships (e.g., Chiang & Hsiao, 2015; Khan, 2017; Munnukka et al., 2019; Rotman & Preece, 2010; Turcotte et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2010). However, there is a noticeable gap in the literature concerning how YouTube influences self-efficacy beyond the confines of the social media landscape. To address this gap, the current study seeks to investigate the impact of watching lifestyle YouTubers on the self-efficacy of audience members aspiring to adopt similar lifestyles as portrayed by these personas.

HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While many studies have examined variables and constructs in connection to self-efficacy such as gender, parasocial relationships, and general exposure to a role model (e.g., BarNir et al., 2011; Dunn, 2019; Hocevar et al., 2014; Liebers & Schramm, 2019; McLeod, 2007; Tukachinsky & Stokunaga, 2013; van Eldik et al., 2019), the question still remains of whether the development of a parasocial relationship via YouTube significantly influences the level of self-efficacy of an individual. Additionally, the above literature supports asking what, if any, effect that gender, repeated viewing, and total cumulative amount of time spent watching YouTubers might have on an individual's level of self-efficacy. Therefore, the following research questions were proposed:

> RQ1a-d: Do the variables of (a) gender, (b) repeated watching, (c) cumulative hours of media watched, and (d) parasocial relationships with YouTubers predict an individual's level of self-efficacy?

Role models have been shown to influence behavioral change, and in order to be successful, an individual needs to feel comfortable and motivated by their role model (Van Zandvoort et al., 2009). If an individual is successful in establishing such a parasocial relationship, they will experience an increase of self-efficacy (Van Zandvoort et al.). The more relatable the role model is to the individual, the more that role model affects the self-efficacy of that individual (Bandura, 1994). Therefore, if the persona is viewed as a role model by an individual (Horton & Wohl, 1956), it may be possible for a parasocial relationship (PSR) to affect the self-efficacy of the audience member. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

> H_1: Parasocial relationships with YouTubers are positively correlated with self-efficacy.

As noted above, gender has been heavily studied in PSR and self-efficacy research. Females tend to have a stronger, more vivid parasocial relationships with personae than males (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). It is therefore possible that they have a stronger level of self-efficacy due to experiencing a stronger parasocial relationship. Studies in this area also show that females also had more positive response (emulating) to their role model, especially regarding the intention to adapt or change when role models were used (BarNir, Watson & Hutchins, 2011). Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H_{2a}: Females will have a stronger PSRs with their chosen YouTubers than males.

H_{2b}: Females will have a higher level of self-efficacy than males with their chosen YouTubers.

People tend to surround themselves with like-minded individuals, in an effort to feel more included (McLeod, 2007; Dunn, 2019; Tukachinsky & Stokunaga, 2013). Social homophily, a hallmark of social networks, is the pervasive phenomenon wherein individuals tend to associate and form connections with others who share similar characteristics, interests, or affiliations, thus fostering an environment of commonality and affinity within these networks (McPherson et al., 2001). Individuals who felt more connected or felt that there was a strong relationship with a YouTube persona were more likely to conform to a similar lifestyle (Hocevar et al., 2014). Therefore, if individuals relied on a virtual role model for support, it is reasonable to theorize that they would most likely spend more time viewing or re-watching the content of the YouTube channel. Van Eldik et al. (2019) found that relationships that were made through social media made respondents feel like they had to check social media more often. In another study (BarNir et al., 2011), role models, like YouTubers, were observed being used as a source of information and support by respondents. Therefore, re-watching YouTubers as role models allowed participants to mentally engage themselves in their chosen activity, and to have the self-efficacy to take on challenges or difficulties they were most likely to encounter in their experiences (BarNir et al., 2011). Re-watching, by choice, may enforce a change in beliefs and attitudes, because increased exposure leads to increased liking and familiarity (Shedlosky-Shoemaker, 2006). Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H_3: Individuals who report that they re-watch YouTube videos from their chosen YouTuber will report higher levels of self-efficacy than those who do not re-watch videos.

With the innate need to feel included or belonging (McLeod, 2007), it is probable that the audience member needed to watch more of the YouTuber to fulfill that need. Hocevar et al. (2014) indicated that the more time an audience member watched a YouTuber, the more they trusted the YouTuber, which increased the audience members' self-efficacy on that topic. Therefore, it logically follows that individuals who spend more time watching their

chosen YouTuber may have increased levels of motivation and information, increasing self-efficacy. Therefore, the following Hypothesis is proposed:

> H_4: Self-efficacy is positively correlated with the reported cumulative weekly viewing time of the respondent's chosen YouTuber.

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact parasocial relationships with lifestyle YouTubers have on audience members' self-efficacy. This study also discussed how other variables, such as gender and exposure time affect self-efficacy in addition to having a parasocial relationship with a chosen YouTuber. These variables were measured using adapted scales which are discussed below.

Respondents, Samples and Sampling Methods

The present study utilized survey methodology to obtain a sample of adults who watch lifestyle YouTubers. The sample for this study was taken from M-Turk, a popular crowd sourcing program founded by Amazon that allows individuals to receive financial compensation to complete jobs, such as taking surveys (Burnham et al., 2018). Qualifying questions were included to ensure that respondents were above the age of 18 and watched at least one YouTuber who had a lifestyle-based channel. Respondents received a payment of $0.50 for completing the survey. The survey ran for approximately four weeks during the summer of 2021.

Design and Procedure

Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the survey was administered using Qualtrics, and the survey link was given to respondents via Amazon M-Turk. Respondents had to meet the screening criteria of being a United States resident and have a completion rate of 90% or above in order to take the survey. If the respondent met the screening criteria and completed the survey, the respondent received a payment of $0.50 upon completion of the survey. The compensation of survey respondents was determined by several factors, including the estimated time required to complete the survey and recommendations for fair compensation from Mechanical Turks Pricing Guidelines. The survey, on average, took respondents approximately 10 minutes to complete. Funding to recruit respondents using M-Turk was provided through a combination of university

support and personal funds.

After briefly defining what the "Lifestyle YouTube" category encompassed (i.e., that which includes lifestyle-related content such as daily life activities and hobbies such as fashion, beauty, health, wellness, travel, cooking, home and family, etc.), survey questions asked respondents to identify "the name or handle of a specific YouTuber or YouTube Channel that you like to watch to promote lifestyle change" and respondents were able to type in an open-ended response to this question. Each handle or name of the YouTuber or YouTube Channel was independently checked by the researchers to ensure that it fell into the broad umbrella category of "Lifestyle YouTuber". If a response to this question did not fit within the Lifestyle YouTube category, the response was eliminated from the final sample. Other survey questions included how often respondents re-watched videos (yes/no), and how much time (approximate hours per week) was spent watching their preferred lifestyle YouTuber's channel. The next sections of the survey consisted of the API scale developed by Auter and Palmgreen (2000), a self-efficacy scale developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995), and finally demographic questions including sex, gender, race, age, education, marital status, and income. The data collected from Qualtrics was analyzed using IBM's Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Variables

YouTube usage. Respondents were asked to list the name of their chosen lifestyle YouTuber (so the respondent has a focal point for the survey) and the gender of the YouTuber (1 = Male, 2 = Female, 3 = Non-binary, 4 = Other, 5 = I prefer not to answer). The survey also asked about weekly hours spent watching their chosen YouTuber using a dropdown box with listed weekly hours between 0 and 168. This allowed for the sample to have an accurate representation of how much the respondent watched their chosen YouTuber. Afterward, respondents were asked if they re-watched videos from their chosen YouTuber (1 = No, 2 = Yes) to separate those who re-watch from those who do not.

Parasocial Relationships. Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) Audience Persona Interaction (API) scale was used to measure the variable of parasocial relationships. This scale was chosen because it was developed to examine identification, interest, interaction, and problem-solving ability (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000). This was important to this study because of the connections seen in the literature regarding PSRs and self-efficacy, as well

as role model response and self-efficacy. The questions were adapted to cater specifically to parasocial relationships with YouTubers. Using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree), these questions asked about the respondents' identification with the persona, attachment to the persona, and if they followed the persona. A sample question includes: "I have the same qualities as my chosen YouTuber." Respondents were instructed to answer all questions in the survey about their chosen lifestyle YouTuber.

Self-Efficacy. A ten-item scale by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995) was used to measure self-efficacy. These questions pertained to one's belief in oneself to meet goals, to be resourceful, and to solve problems. A sample question includes: "I can always manage to solve difficult problems, regarding my lifestyle if I try hard enough." This was measured using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true, 2 = hardly true, 3 = moderately true, and 4 = exactly true).

Demographics. Demographic questions consisted of sex, gender, age, race, income, education, and marital status.

RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

A total of 713 respondents completed the survey. Of those 713 responses, 289 responses were removed due to one of the following reasons: if the respondent took the survey more than once, if the respondent did not satisfy all qualifying questions, if the respondent provided completely patterned survey answers, or if the respondent did not provide a YouTuber's name or YouTube channel. The total number of responses used in the final analysis was 424.

Scale and Survey Analysis

The scales used in this study were tested for reliability. Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) 22-item API scale was considered reliable with a Cronbach's Alpha of .92. Schwarzer and Jerusalem's (1995) ten-item self-efficacy scale was considered reliable with a Cronbach's Alpha of .78. The average number of hours a respondent reported watching their chosen YouTuber per week was 7.98 hours (M = 7.98) All these items are demonstrated below in *Table 1.*

Table 1
Scale Reliability

	Number of Items	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*CA*
API Scale	22	424	87.81	12.00	.92
Self-efficacy Scale	10	424	30.95	4.29	.78
Hours Watched Weekly	1	424	7.98	8.18	

Demographics

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic information of the survey's respondent sample. Regarding gender, 60.4% (n = 256) of the respondents identified as male and 39.6% (n = 168) of the respondents identified as female. Of the 424 respondents, 0.9% (n = 4) were in the 18 – 20 age range, 33% (n = 140) were in the 21 – 29 age range, 37% (n = 157) were in the 30 – 39 age range, 19.1% (n = 81) were in the 40 – 49 age range, 7.1% (n = 30) were in the 50 – 59 age range, and 2.8% (n = 12) were the age of 60 or above.

Of the 424 respondents, three (0.7%) identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 13 (3.1%) identified as Asian, 24 (5.7%) identified as black or African American, 375 (88.4%) identified as white, four (.9%) identified as other, and five (1.2%) did not wish to disclose their ethnicity. Of the 424 respondents, 16 (3.8%) had a high school diploma as their highest level of education, 14 (3.3%) had some college as their highest level of education, 13 (3.1%) had a 2-year degree as their highest level of education, 304 (71.7%) had a 4-year degree as their highest level of education, 76 (17.9%) had a professional degree as their highest level of education, and one respondent (0.2%) had a doctorate degree as their highest level of education.

Research Questions 1a-d. These research questions examined whether the variables of (a) gender, (b) repeated watching, (c) cumulative hours of media watched weekly, and (d) parasocial relationships with YouTubers predicted an individual's level of self-efficacy. A multiple regression, including all predictor variables, revealed that PSR was a significant predictor ($\beta = .602$, $p < .001$) of self-efficacy while cumulative viewing hours

was only a marginally significant predictor ($\beta = .074$, $p = .058$). Gender and re-watching failed to predict self-efficacy: ($F(4, 419) = 61.061$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .37$. Regression coefficients and standard errors for RQ1 can be found in Table 2.

Table 2
Multiple Regression for RQ1a-d

	B	*SE(B)*	*β*	*t*	Sig. *(p)*
Gender	-.045	.034	-.052	-1.325	.186
Repeated Watching	-.149	.088	-.066	-1.694	.091
Hours Watched Weekly	.004	.002	.074	1.898	.058
Parasocial Relationships	.473	.031	.602	15.425	<.001

$F(4, 419) = 61.061$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .368$

Hypothesis 1. H1 looked for a linear association between the strength of a parasocial relationship and the level of self-efficacy of the respondent. A Pearson correlation demonstrated a significant positive correlation between self-efficacy and parasocial relationships: $r(424) = .597$, $p < .001$. Therefore, H_1 is supported.

Hypothesis 2a and 2b. Both of these hypotheses were analyzed using a T-test. H2a examined parasocial relationship strength differences in males and females. Results of the t-test failed to find a significant difference in the scores between males ($M = 4.02$, $SD = .56$) and females ($M = 3.95$, $SD = .52$): $t(422) = 1.14$, $p = 0.26$. Therefore, H_{2a} is not supported.

H2b examined differences in self-efficacy levels in males and females. Results of the t-test did not find a significant difference in the scores between males ($M = 3.12$, $SD = .43$) and females ($M = 3.05$, $SD = .42$); $t(422) = 1.72$, $p = 0.09$. Therefore, H_{2b} is not supported.

Hypothesis 3. H3 examined levels of self-efficacy in those who re-watch YouTube videos made by their chosen YouTuber versus those who do not re-watch YouTube videos from their chosen YouTuber. This hypothesis was analyzed using a T-test. Results of the t-test did not find a significant difference in the scores between those who re-watch their chosen YouTuber ($M = 3.09$, $SD = .43$) and those who do not re-watch their chosen YouTuber ($M = 3.13$, $SD = .53$): $t(422) = .29$, $p = .39$. Therefore, H_3 is not supported.

Hypothesis 4. H4 looked for a linear association between self-efficacy and viewing time and was tested using Pearson correlations. A Pearson correlation did not demonstrate a significant correlation between self-efficacy and parasocial relationships: $r(424) = .048$, $p = .326$. Therefore, we failed to reject the null, and H_4 is not supported.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how self-efficacy is affected by parasocial relationships (PSRs), gender, and viewing habits when watching lifestyle YouTubers. While other studies have found gender, exposure, and PSRs to have a significant impact on self-efficacy (BarNir et al., 2011; vanZandoot et al., 2009; Tian & Yoo, 2014; Sokolova & Perez, 2021), this study is the first to investigate the effects that parasocial relationships with lifestyle YouTubers have on audience member's self-efficacy levels. The primary research objectives were to determine: (a) if parasocial relationships are being formed with lifestyle YouTubers, (b) how do those relationships effect the self-efficacy of audience members when it comes to lifestyle changes, and (c) what other factors, such as frequency and duration of exposure to chosen YouTubers, gender, and other demographics might affect self-efficacy.

Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) API scale was used to measure parasocial relationships and Schwarzer and Jerusalem's (1995) self-efficacy scale was used to measure self-efficacy. YouTube watching was measured by asking which lifestyle YouTuber the audience member preferred to watch, how often they re-watched videos, and how much time was spent watching the YouTube channel. The primary results of this study indicate that parasocial relationships with YouTubers significantly influence an increase in self-efficacy in audience members. A multiple regression was run to predict gender, repeated watching, hours watched weekly, and parasocial relationships. Of these variables, the only variable that significantly predicted audience member's levels of self-efficacy was parasocial relationships $(p < .001)$ while the amount of cumulative weekly viewing hours watched marginally predicted self-efficacy ($p = .058$). While gender was not a significant factor in increased self-efficacy in this study, this is contrary to results from previous studies on PSRs and media (BarNir et al., 2011; Sokolova & Perez, 2020).

It is surprising that parasocial relationships with lifestyle YouTubers was the only variable that significantly predicted an increase in self-efficacy levels of audience members. Because exposure was not found to be a significant factor in this study, we theorize that parasocial relationships with YouTubers may be taking place in the minds of the audience members, or in what Honeycutt (2003) calls "imagined interactions". Previous research on imagined interactions and parasocial relationships (Madison et al., 2015) found that individuals were having imagined interactions with people they did not know in real life (mediated personae). Madison et al. (2015) also found that audience members potentially carried behaviors of their chosen persona into their lives. Imagined interactions allow the audience member to form a relationship between themselves and the personae, setting the audience member up to potentially be more successful in their goals. Clearly, further work is necessary on this subject, and future studies should focus on investigating the possible connection between parasocial relationships with YouTubers, self-efficacy, and imagined interactions.

Re-watching videos of lifestyle YouTubers was also not significant in this study but another study (Shedlosky-Shoemaker, 2006) found it to be significant both in attitude and behavioral change. These variables may not have been significant in the current study due to the self-selected sampling process. M-Turkers tend to have a lower social engagement than those in the general population (McCredie & Morey, 2018), and self-efficacy is typically associated with extraversion (Judge et al., 2007; Schmitt, 2007). Therefore, some of the dominant personality traits of the M-Turker community may have skewed some of the results of this study.

A factor in increased self-efficacy was audience members wanting the persona to achieve their goals. Seeing a role model do an action successfully will likely increase self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). Additionally, a strong PSR with a persona could result in behavioral changes (Perse & Rubin, 1988; Tian & Yoo, 2014). An audience member may support the persona because the audience member viewed the persona as a role model and wanted to replicate an action or behavior.

Finding similarities between the persona and themselves, Rubin (1993) proposed and Agee (2014) found that audience members had PSRs with personae who interact with others as the viewer does. Therefore, there are some comparisons between audience

members and their chosen persona. Those with a strong PSR may carry behaviors from their persona into their own lives (Madison et al., 2015; Tian & Yoo, 2014). Audience members look for personae they feel similar to, which may lead audience members to emulate the persona.

The respondents wanting to be more like the persona indicated wishful identification. Wishful identification is the audience member emulating the persona they identified with (Giles, 2002; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019), developing a stronger PSR (Lim et al., 2020; Hoffner, 1996). Additionally, task attraction was also a key component to PSRs (Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Rubin & Step, 2000). If the audience member is emulating the persona, then they may adopt lifestyle traits (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019). This corresponds with Bandura's (1997; 1994) self-efficacy study regarding the observation and replication of the actions of a role model. In conclusion, seeing someone accomplish a goal can increase the self-efficacy of an individual doing that same task (Bandura & Adams, 1977; Bandura, 1994; Green et al., 2006; BarNir et al., 2011).

Theoretical Implications

Traditionally, parasocial relationships (PSRs) are one-sided relationships, but with the development of new media platforms, audience members are often getting responses or short interactions from personae (Stever & Lawson, 2013). PSRs in new media need to be studied differently than traditional media solely based on the increased communication between the persona and the audience member. PSRs on social media are influencing the lives of audience members, forming a bridge between the imagined relationship and how the audience member acts. This opens opportunity for new theoretical development about the function and motivation of PSRs. While many studies revolved around television (Cohen, 2004; Liebers & Schramm, 2019; Perse & Rubin, 1988; Tian & Yoo, 2014), this study focused on audience members who were specifically looking for personae, or role models, that exemplify a lifestyle on YouTube. Through seeking guidance from YouTubers, audience members may adapt and change their own lives. Additionally, Tolson (2010) indicated that YouTubers were breaking the barrier between average individuals and media persona; therefore, there is an active combination of imagined and real life occurring on social media.

Practical Implications

This study showed that audience members are developing PSRs with lifestyle YouTubers and it is affecting their self-efficacy. Companies already use YouTubers as spokespeople for their products, hoping that if the persona used the product, the audience member would want to use the product as well (Fred, 2015; Nouri, 2018; Tolson, 2010). In addition to being a source of entertainment Tolson (2010) indicated YouTube is being used as a source of instruction as well. This aligned with replicating behaviors of role models (Bandura, 1994). When using the same products as the persona, the audience member may feel like they are more closely replicating the YouTuber, which is supported by H_1.

Limitations

While there were significant insights made in the current study, there were some limitations. First, the sample for this study came from M-Turk, and while this is generally a diverse community, it does not necessarily represent the population correctly (Ross et al., 2010). This sample was also on a voluntary first-serve basis. A self-selected sample can create a bias in personality traits of the respondents, which may lead to an exaggeration of a particular finding in the study (Sharma, 2017).

Additionally, there was a skew in the demographics of this sample, specifically regarding race, age, education, and marital status. About 88% of the sample was white and 70% of respondents were between the ages of 21-39. Most respondents (71.7%) had a 4-year degree, and 86.6% were married. This skew most likely occurred due to the demographics of M-Turk and sampling methods. This was a cross-sectional study, which limited what could be examined. This is a limitation in this study because traditionally PSRs and self-efficacy are both developed over time. In this way, the variables, while definite during the study, may differ at a future point.

Another limitation is related to the assumption that individuals who report re-watching YouTube videos from their selected YouTuber will consistently watch the entire video. In practice, viewers' engagement with online video content can vary widely, ranging from brief interactions of a few seconds to watching a portion or the entirety of a video. The extent of viewers' interaction may be influenced by their level of interest or attraction to the content, which may indeed lead to repeated viewings but does not guarantee that individuals watch an entire video. Furthermore, as the focus here was on conventional

YouTube videos, it is essential to acknowledge that future studies should consider the potential influence of YouTube Shorts, a format characterized by its brevity and distinct user engagement patterns, which may introduce unique dynamics that warrant examination in the context of self-efficacy. Future studies could examine more detailed information regarding the frequency with which respondents re-watched their chosen YouTuber, whether they rewatched all or only part of a video, and whether there were discernible distinctions among respondents who exhibited a higher frequency of re-watching behavior.

Lastly, the focus of this survey was on lifestyle YouTubers in general. This made for a very broad sample within the Lifestyle YouTube niche. Looking at a more specific lifestyle category (e.g., fashion, beauty, health, wellness, travel, cooking, home, family, etc.) would likely provide insight to specific groups, which may yield more accurate results.

Future Research and Suggestions

There are four primary suggestions for future research: (a) look at specific groups, (b) look at other methodologies, (c) look at other media, and (d) look at the development of imagined interactions.

Look at specific groups. The focus of this survey was on lifestyle YouTubers in general. This made for a very broad sample. Looking at a more specific lifestyle or YouTubers (niches) would likely provide insight to specific groups, providing more accurate results. Additionally, looking at individual lifestyle niches creates an opportunity to compare the groups and look for constants and differences in PSRs and self-efficacy. This can also be done by partnering with YouTubers and asking the persona to distribute a survey. This would offer insight into what occurs when the persona asks the audience member to do a task.

Look other methodologies. A qualitative study on this topic would be insightful. Having a qualitative study involving focus groups and interviews would allow respondents to openly talk about their YouTubers. This differentiation could open the opportunity to get more insight into PSRs and discover new avenues of research that would not have otherwise been thought of. Doing a longitudinal study, qualitative or quantitative, would also be beneficial. PSRs and self-efficacy evolve over time, so a longitudinal study would

demonstrate how this occurs in relation to audience members (Bandura, 1994; Perse & Rubin, 1988).

Look at other media. This study can be replicated with other forms of social media such as Instagram, Facebook, or Snapchat. It could be assumed that if these lifestyle adaptations are occurring via YouTube, then this can be happening on other platforms as well. Additionally, these studies can compare how audience members use each social media platform differently. Also, it could be interesting to compare PSRs and self-efficacy developmental differences between social media and traditional media.

Look at the development of imagined interactions. Through the findings of this study, it seemed that a large part of PSRs with YouTubers are imagined interactions and are not relative to the amount of time watching the YouTuber. Therefore, a study focusing on the development of imagined interactions between the audience member and the persona would likely provide a more in-depth look into what is causing the increase in self-efficacy.

CONCLUSION

This study is novel in investigating the effect that parasocial relationships with lifestyle YouTubers have on self-efficacy and is a step towards filling the gap in the literature in this area of study. Results from this study suggest that parasocial relationships with lifestyle YouTubers are happening more within the realm of imagined interactions and not predominately while watching the actual videos. This study opens many new opportunities for research, specifically looking at parasocial relationships in social media, new ways audience members are using parasocial relationships, and how parasocial relationships are infiltrating the personal life of audience members.

While this study did have its limitations, it added valuable information about how audience members use their PSRs in their personal lives and provides a base for future research on how PSRs with social media personae effect self-efficacy. This is the first study to look at the effects PSRs have on self-efficacy when watching lifestyle YouTubers. Therefore, the significance of this study is seeing a new utilization of PSRs. Audience members are not just creating relationships with a persona, they are using the videos made by the persona to change significant parts of their lives. Additionally, this study

adds insight regarding formation of PSRs with YouTubers. These PSRs are being formed primarily through imagined interaction and not physical increased exposure to the persona. While the formation of PSRs via imagined interaction has been studied before, it has not been studied with lifestyle YouTubers. This shows a whole new side of media research that needs to be studied. Media, like all forms of communication, are constantly changing and evolving, so research on the subject needs to do the same. This study has established new insights into how PSRs are used through YouTube and how it affects audience members in their personal lives. This merge of imagined and real-life interactions continues to develop and is worthy of future research.

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Funding and Acknowledgements

The authors declare no funding sources or conflicts of interest.

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