

# Parasocial Relationships with Musicians

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Extending research on the development of parasocial relationships (PSR), the present study fits into a long line of research beginning with Rubin and McHugh's (1987) seminal work investigating the how communication, liking, and intimacy interact as audiences form relationships with mediated characters. The current study applied Ruben and McHugh's model to the unique connection consumers feel with their favorite musicians. Structural equation modeling reveals that these parasocial relationships with musicians

differ from those previously found with more traditional media characters. The model confirms that music fans develop parasocial relationships with musicians, as well as reinforce previous findings that exposure is a powerful predictor of attraction. The results provide justification for extending the theoretical expectations of parasocial relationships to musicians.

*Keywords: Parasocial relationship, new media, musicians, attraction*

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First presented by Horton and Wohl in 1956, "parasocial" relationships (PSR) are one-sided relationships that individuals develop with characters they encounter in the mass media. In the decades since the phenomenon was first introduced, a voluminous body of research has explored how and why individuals form these unique relationships with radio personalities (Rubin & Step, 2000; Savage & Spence, 2014) television characters (Koenig & Lessan, 1985; Rubin, Perse & Powell, 1987), children's television characters (Hoffner, 1996; Rosaen & Dibble, 2011), athletes (Earnhardt & Haridakis, 2009), film stars (Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012) and characters in books (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011). Horton and Wohl (1956) argued that

[o]ne of the striking characteristics of the new mass media – radio, television, and the movies – is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer. The conditions of response to the performer are analogous to those in a primary group. The most remote and illustrious men are met as if they were in the circle of one's peers ... We propose to call this seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer a para-social relationship (p. 215).

What makes these relationships distinctive from interpersonal relationships is the fact that the relationship is “seeming.” Horton and Wohl never expected media consumers to encounter or meet the object of their parasocial affection outside of the mediated context. As defined, a parasocial relationship exists between a media consumer and a *fictitious* character that is created for the screen and does not exist “in reality.” However, as the technologies and practices of mass media communication have become increasingly interactive, the boundaries between media and reality have become more challenging to define, as has the distinction between a fictional character and the individual who performs that role (van Es, 2017). Recent research and theorizing on parasocial relationships have endeavored to address these complexities.

In 2003, Giles elaborated multiple dimensions of parasociability, which address the mediated nature of a parasocial relationship but also allow that the viewer or fan may anticipate a chance of interpersonal contact, for example through a personal letter. In the same piece, Giles (2003) proposed that the changing boundaries between mediated and interpersonal contact are joined by a slippage around the object of the relationship. In other words, parasocial relationships are formed with fictional characters, celebrities, and even cartoon figures.

The changing nature of celebrity, and the affordances of interactive social media, permit audiences unprecedented access to their favorite stars and the roles they play. Clear contrasts between public personae and private life are muddled. These shifting boundaries invite continued research on the evolution of PSRs, especially as the potential for new kinds of interactions and relationships become possible and popular (Stever, 2013). As Ferris (2010) notes, “we are awash in celebrity,” (p. 392) and new opportunities for examining the relationships between publics and celebrities abound. While the preponderance of research has distinguished actors from their roles and focused on the relationships individuals have with fictionalized characters, more recent work has examined the relationships those in the public develop with celebrities as “real” people (Bond, 2016; Frederick et al., 2012 & Larecque, 2014), as well as amateur performers, “real people” who cultivate a public persona through social media platforms or YouTube (Kurtin, O'Brien, Roy & Dam, 2018).

This line of parasocial research further collapses the distinction between the “real” person and their portrayals, and, interestingly, invites us to return to early research which examined parasocial relationships with newscasters and identified realism and authenticity (knowing what they are “really like”) as key factors in the relationship individuals report with favorite news presenters (Levy, 1979; Rubin, Pearse & Powell, 1985).

Another group of public personae who collapse the distinction between the “real” person and the performance is found in popular music. Musicians represent a unique population in celebrity and popular culture in that the “character” they portray is, ostensibly, themselves, and in this way the musician is marked as particularly “authentic” (Grazian, 2003; McKinna, 2014). Like celebrities in other fields of artistic and cultural expression, musicians open up their lives with “backstage passes,” “all access” tour documentaries, opportunities to go “behind the video,” and various occasions for “online access” to the musician. Take for instance Beyoncé’s phenomenally popular Instagram account with over 117 million followers in 2018 (Statistia, 2018), or *Witness World Wide*, the 96-hour livestream of Katy Perry’s life which generated nearly 50 million viewers in 2017 (Bell, 2017).

Changes in the way individuals purchase music, from analog cassettes and CDs to digital downloads and subscription streaming services has moved music audiences increasingly online (Nielsen, November 2017; Nielsen, July 2017). Synergies and convergence on these platforms may be increasing both the opportunity and degree of parasocial interaction and relationship-building between musicians and their publics. Certainly, recent research suggests that parasocial interactions on social networking sites are higher than reported in traditional media (Frederick et al., 2012; Frederick et al., 2014; Stever & Lawson, 2013). A fuller understanding of the degree and strength of parasocial relationships with musicians may provide an additional lens for understanding larger trends in artist development, representation, sales and public relations.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Parasocial Relationships**

One consequence of the widespread diffusion of visual media, television, movies, and social media has been that social interaction, once restricted to persons known to an

individual in real life, has expanded to include interactions occurring exclusively in a mediated context (Stever, 2013). Through multiple and ongoing interactions with mediated characters or personae, (what are now called parasocial interactions) viewers come to know mannerisms, behaviors, sense-of-humor, facial expressions and other personal details associated with an individual or character through the media (Stever, 2013). Over time, as the number and quality of those interactions increases, a person may feel that they have developed a relationship with the mediated character or persona. The empirical investigation of parasocial relationships derives from Rubin and McHugh's (1987) test of Berger and Calabrese's (1975) model of relational development, and investigates whether relationships with characters or celebrities encountered in the mass media follow similar or distinct patterns from relationships formed in face-to-face contexts. Rubin and McHugh argued that three of Berger and Calabrese's axioms were particularly germane to the "seeming" relationships identified by Horton and Wohl (1956): frequency of communication, attraction to the individual who is the object of the relationship, and intimacy) resulting from the reduction of uncertainty) produced by communication frequency and attraction (Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

As diagrammed in figure 1, Rubin and McHugh argue that exposure to a character or television persona leads to attraction, leading to parasocial interactions, which in turn predict the importance of that relationship to the viewer. Attraction is itself a multifaceted variable, and includes social attraction (the extent to which the viewer would like to befriend the character or personality), physical attraction (the extent to which the viewer finds the character or personality physically appealing), and task attraction (the extent to which the viewer perceives the character or personality capable, credible, or talented).

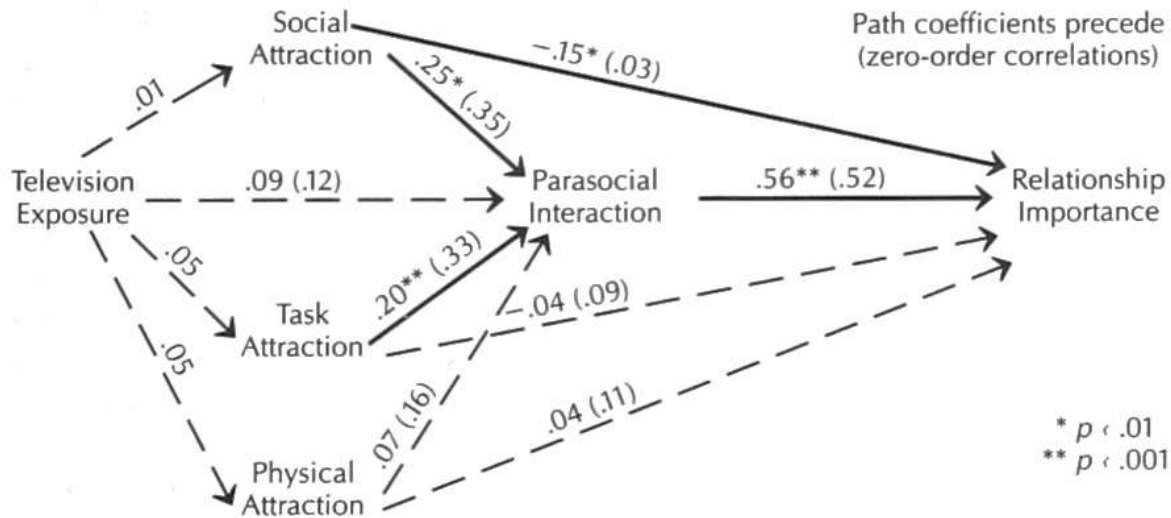


Figure 1. Path analysis of mediated attraction (Rubin & McHugh, 1987)

Rubin and McHugh (1987) tested their model by asking respondents to think about their favorite television characters. They found that audiences finding the television character capable and likeable made the viewer feel they had a relationship with that character, and that this influenced the degree to which the relationship was important to the viewer. Subsequent studies examining parasocial relationships have largely confirmed these results, with some variation around the affordances different media have for exposure and interaction. For example, recent work on parasocial relationships in the realm of social media highlight that the highly interactive, “always on,” nature of platforms like Facebook (Joinson, 2008; Tsiotsou, 2015), Twitter (Bond, 2016; Frederick et al, 2012; Stever & Lawson, 2013), and YouTube (Chen, 2014; Kurtin, O’Brien, Roy & Dam, 2018) promotes increased parasocial interaction and relationship development.

### Musicians and their fans

In 2016 David Bowie died and music fans mourned. After the news broke on the artist’s Facebook page, people flocked to social media to share their sadness and discuss the influence that Bowie had on their lives, their identities, sexualities, and appreciation of music. Bowie’s son Duncan posted family photos, and artists and industry insiders, from Kanye West to Bowie’s producer Tony Visconti, shared their admiration and pain on Twitter, Instagram and Tumblr. Within hours of media confirmations of Bowie’s death,

music streaming sites posted curated playlists featuring Bowie and his influences. A small tribute tour was speculated, took place in January 2018, and immediately regrouped to reach a wider, international market. This outpouring was so pervasive that it led to the publication of *Starman: Fans Say Goodbye to David Bowie* (Weeva, 2018). As the book's editor explains, "the outpouring of grief made it clear that [David Bowie] also changed the lives of many of his fans. With his unabashed theatricality, embrace of ambiguity and willingness to experiment, Bowie seemed to give us all permission to be different" (np). The book's pages are filled with personal accounts of fans' interactions with Bowie, from the first time one young man heard Bowie on the radio, to another who danced enthusiastically as Bowie rehearsed for a show in the street below his New York office window. In these memorials, Bowie is not presented as a character, or unattainable celebrity, but as a man who had an interpersonal relationship with his fans. However, the complexity of the uneven relationship musicians have with their fans is evident in the fact that Bowie's 18-month battle with cancer had been withheld from the public, as well as in the statement from Bowie's representative that "while many of you will share in this loss, we ask that you respect the family's privacy during their time of grief" (Grow, 2017).

Other artists have chosen to more deliberately break down the barriers between themselves and their fans. In 2017, singer Katy Perry, the most followed person on Twitter at the time, released *Katy Perry Live: Witness World Wide*, a four-day livestream event. The first-of-its-kind video featured Perry living in a *Big Brother*-style house with cameras tracking her every move, as well as promoting her fifth studio album, *Witness*. In the 96-hour YouTube event Perry spoke directly to the question of authenticity, let the cameras into dinner parties, rehearsals, and even a therapy session. *Katy Perry Live: Witness World Wide* garnered over 49 million views on YouTube (Bell, 2017) and the album, *Witness* went top #1 on Billboard charts (Caulfield, 2017). Billboard Music critic Steven Horowitz's review of the livestream speaks directly to the parasocial potential of Perry's project:

Over the course of four days, Perry presented herself as humble and gracious, amiable and endearing.... she showed the type of person she truly is, flaws and all, in a way that was so public that it almost felt brave, to know that your every move is being tracked by thousands of people across the world at any given moment.... Then there were moments that could have gone awry or be embarrassing, but ended up being emotional without coming off as too earnest.... At times, the live stream

was boring and slow, but so is life.... For four days, we got to see Katheryn Hudson, a peek from behind the curtain.

From a mass communication research perspective, Beyoncé, Bowie, and Perry fall neatly in to a research literature examining the one-sided relationship individuals have with famous personalities and generally conform to the model developed by Rubin and McHugh (1987). And yet, the contours of this relationship appear to be changing. The original research examining PSRs focused on *characters*, not the actor portraying them. Increased and interactive accessibility to media personae, and especially musicians who are playing themselves for millions of viewers, represents an untapped opportunity for parasocial research.

### **Parasocial Relationships with Musicians**

While a handful of studies focused on celebrity PSRs have included musicians, none have examined musicians as a special case, or have identified musicians as an opportunity to make sense of the changing role of celebrity. Nonetheless, when asked to think of a “favorite celebrity,” nearly 20 percent of study participants select a musician (Derrick, Gabriel & Tippin, 2008). Research, including that by Stever (1994, 2009) examines musicians through the lens of fandom, a concept clearly linked to the parasocial relationship. Stever (1991, 1994) examined the motivations fans have for interacting with celebrities, and found that the three most frequent responses were 1) task attraction (I like the celebrity because (s)he is the best at what they do), 2) romantic attraction (I like the celebrity based on sexual/romantic feelings), and 3) identification/social attraction (I like the celebrity because (s)he is like me or because I want to be like him/her).

A unique consideration for evaluating the relationship between musicians and their audiences regards their *musicianship*, an umbrella term which refers to the many skills a musician brings together in the process of creating and performing musical entertainment. These skills include instrument technique, intonation, articulation, rhythm, performance, and composition (Bresler, 2005). Although previous research on musicians has lumped these performers in with other celebrities and popular personae, distinctive qualities of authenticity, access and talent may influence the degree to which musicians provoke a parasocial response in their listeners, fans, and among the public more generally. The current study draws on Rubin and McHugh’s (1987) model of parasocial relationship development to determine whether and how the predictors of parasocial relationships

differ when we look specifically at musicians. In particular, we are curious to see whether task attraction, among the least well-understood predictors of parasocial interaction, emerges as a significant path. We propose that the paths first proposed by Rubin and McHugh will continue to hold for musicians, and that task attraction will be confirmed as a significant predictor:

H1: Exposure to the musician will be positively related to parasocial relationships with the musician.

H2a: Exposure to the musician will be positively related to social attraction.

H2b: Exposure to the musician will be positively related to physical attraction.

H2c: Exposure to the musician will be positively related to task attraction.

H3a: Social attraction will be related positively to parasocial relationships.

H3b: Physical attraction will be related positively to parasocial relationships.

H3c: Task attraction will be related positively to parasocial relationships.

H4a: Social attraction will be related positively to the perceived importance of a relationship with a musician.

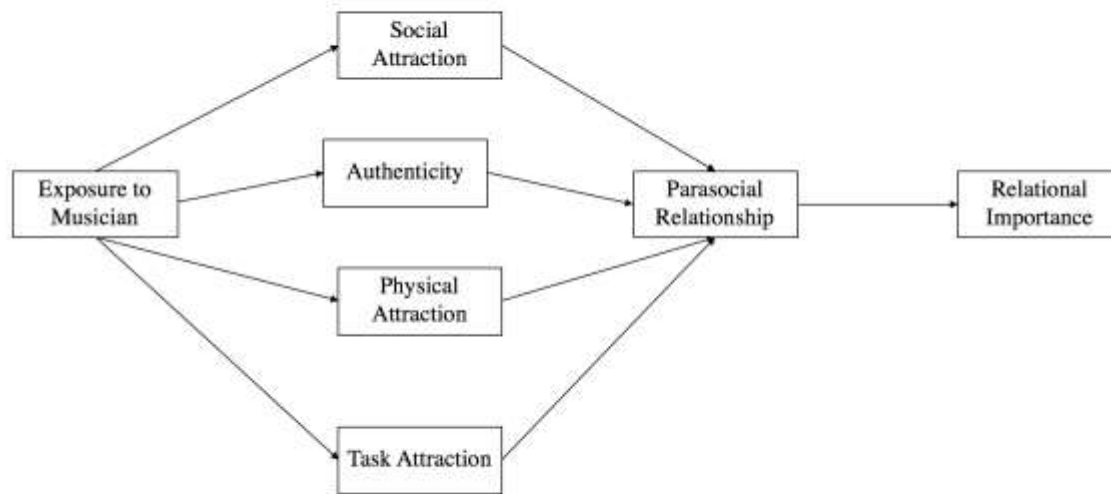
H4b: Physical attraction will be related positively to the perceived importance of a relationship with a musician.

H4c: Task attraction will be related positively to the perceived importance of a relationship with a musician.

H5: Parasocial relationships will be related positively to the perceived importance of a relationship with a musician.

RQ1: Will authenticity mediate the relationship between exposure to the musician and parasocial interaction?





*Figure 2:* Proposed Path Model

## METHODS

### Sample and Procedures

Participants for this study were recruited using Mechanical Turk. The survey was hosted by Survey Monkey. Participants were compensated \$1 upon completion of the survey. The study was reviewed and approved by Institutional Review Board. A total of 276 participants completed the study. Among the participants, 58% ( $n = 160$ ) identified as male, and 42% ( $n = 116$ ) identified as female, while 11.6% ( $n = 32$ ) were between the age of 18 to 24 years, 56.2% ( $n = 155$ ) were 25 to 34 years, 16.3% ( $n = 45$ ) were from 35 to 44 years, 10.9% ( $n = 30$ ) 45 to 54 years, 2.9% ( $n = 8$ ) were between 55 and 64 years, and 2.2% ( $n = 6$ ) reported being over 65 years old. With the exception of open-ended questions, all items use a five-point Likert scale to measure the extent to which participants agree with presented statements

### Measures

**Favorite Musician.** To start the survey participants were asked as series of questions about music and their favorite musician. These included, “Do you listen to music regularly?” “in a typical day, how much time would you estimate you spend listening to music?” “Who is your favorite musician?” “How long have you been listening to that musician?” “Have you ever met your favorite musician in real life?” “Have you been to

any of their shows?" "If yes, how many?" and "How do you listen to your favorite musician?"

**Social Media Exposure.** This anchor variable establishes a baseline of social media exposure. It was measured using two items adapted from Federick, Lim, Clavio, and Walsh (2012). Participants were asked to report the amount of time they spent using social media related to the topic of music. The questions were: "How much time would you estimate that you spend reading posts about music on social media in an average day?" and "How much time would you estimate that you spend posting to social media about music in an average day?" ( $r = .81, p < .05$ ).

**Parasocial interaction.** Parasocial interaction was measured by combining the items from Rubin, Perse, and Powell's (1985) parasocial interaction scale ( $\alpha = .85$ ) and Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) Audience Persona scale ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Auter and Palmgreen's scale was included as a more contemporary measurement tool and also because it is multifaceted to include identification with favorite musician, interest in favorite musician, group identification/interaction, and favorite musician's problem-solving ability. Sample items include: "I like to compare my ideas with what the musician says" and "The musician makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends" (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985) and "I can imagine myself as the musician" and "I can identify with the musician" (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000). Cronbach's alpha for the combined measure was very strong ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

**Attraction.** The 18-item social, physical, and task attraction scale developed by McCroskey and McCain (1974) was used. Sample items include: "I think the musician could be a friend of mine," "I think the musician is quite attractive," and "The musician would be a poor problem solver (reversed)." Scores for each subscale were averaged: social attraction ( $\alpha = .72, M = 3.4, SD = .81$ ); physical attraction ( $\alpha = .74, M = 3.5, SD = .73$ ); and task attraction ( $\alpha = .49, M = 3.5, SD = .69$ ).

**Relational importance.** The importance of developing a relationship with one's favorite musician was measured using six questions used by Rubin and McHugh (1987). Sample statements include: "Listening to my favorite musician is one of the most important things I do each day or each week," "I would rather listen to my favorite musician than visit with friends" and "I would rather listen to my favorite musician than attend a social activity." The reported Cronbach's alpha for this scale was ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

**Authenticity.** To measure the degree to which the participant uses social media to engage with musicians online, a survey developed by Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016) was used. Sample questions include: “The musician is genuine,” and “The musician seems real to me” ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

## RESULTS

Table 1 reports means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables. The proposed model was tested using SPSS AMOS. The model yielded poor fit (RMSEA = .31, CMIN/DF = 28.03, CFI = .45,  $\chi^2 = 336.3$ ,  $p = .00$ ). However, all the paths were significant. The model fit did not improve significantly upon removing the non-significant paths. The removal of two additional paths that had a low correlation (exposure  $\rightarrow$  physical attraction, exposure  $\rightarrow$  authenticity) and inclusion of three additional paths (exposure  $\rightarrow$  relational importance, task attraction  $\rightarrow$  physical attraction, and task attraction  $\rightarrow$  authenticity) brought the model fit to acceptable range (RMSEA = .25, CMIN/DF = 18.48, CFI = .68,  $\chi^2 = 203.29$ ,  $p = .00$ ). The final model presented in Figure 3 includes the coefficients and p-values for every path. Table 2 lists standardized path coefficients, standard errors and p-value of the final model.

Table 1  
*Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 PSR	1							
2 Social Attraction	.306**	1						
3 Physical Attraction	.310**	.398**	1					
4 Task Attraction	.2**	.638**	.499**	1				
5 Relational Importance	.651**	-.148*	.123*	-.144**	1			
6 Lyric Engagement	-.615**	-.118	-.217**	-.148**	-.477**	1		
7 Social Media Exposure	.133*	-.282**	-.171**	-.344**	.335**	-.138*	1	
8 Authenticity	-.408**	-.356**	-.3**	-.408**	-.087	.536**	.166**	1
Mean	3.71	3.41	3.46	3.33	3.33	2.29	1.93	1.83
SD	0.6	0.81	0.73	0.49	0.9	0.91	1.1	.81

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

The first set of hypotheses proposed that exposure to the respondent's favorite musician will be positively related to social (H2a), physical (H2b), and task (H2c) attraction towards the musician. Social attraction ( $r = -.28, p < .01$ ), physical attraction ( $r = -.17, p < .01$ ), and task attraction ( $r = -.34, p < .01$ ) were significantly correlated with exposure to the musician. However, contrary to the proposed hypotheses, social, physical and task attraction were negatively related to exposure, leaving H2a, H2b, and H2c unsupported.

The next set of hypotheses posited that social attraction (H3a), physical attraction (H3b), and task attraction (H3c) will be positively related to parasocial relationships. Bivariate correlation analysis revealed that H3a, H3b, and H3c were supported. Specifically, social attraction ( $r = .31, p < .001$ ), physical attraction ( $r = .31, p < .001$ ) and task attraction ( $r = .2, p < .001$ ) were moderately correlated with parasocial relationships.

Hypotheses 4a, 4b, 4c inquired about the relationship between social attraction, physical attraction and task attraction and the perceived importance of having a relationship with the favored musician. Physical attraction ( $r = .12, p < .05$ ) was positively related to perceived importance of relationship with a musician, supporting hypotheses H4b. However, both social attraction ( $r = -.15, p < .05$ ) and task attraction ( $r = -.14, p < .05$ ) were negatively related to perceived importance of relationship. Hence, H4a and H4c were not supported.

The perceived importance of having a relationship with the favored musician and the degree of the parasocial relationship itself were highly correlated ( $r = .65, p < .01$ ); supporting H5.

RQ1 questioned whether the participants' perception of the favored musician as authentic would mediate the relationship between media exposure and the parasocial relationship. In the first step of the mediation model, it was revealed that media exposure significantly predicted parasocial relationship ( $b = .08, t(249) = 2.39, p < .05$ ). Step 2 showed that media exposure significantly predicted the mediator, authenticity ( $b = -.11, t(249) = -2.15, p < .05$ ). In step 3 of the mediation analysis, the mediator, authenticity, had a significant relationship with parasocial relationship while controlling for media exposure,  $b = -.4, t(248) = -12.06, p < .05$ . The final step to establish mediation was to test the relationship between media exposure and the parasocial relationship while controlling

for authenticity, which was not significant  $b = .03$ ,  $t(248) = 1.34$ ,  $p = n.s.$  In order to test the whole mediation model, a Sobel test was conducted and a full mediation model was established ( $z = 2.11$ ,  $p = .03$ ). It was found that authenticity fully mediated the relationship between media exposure and parasocial relationship.

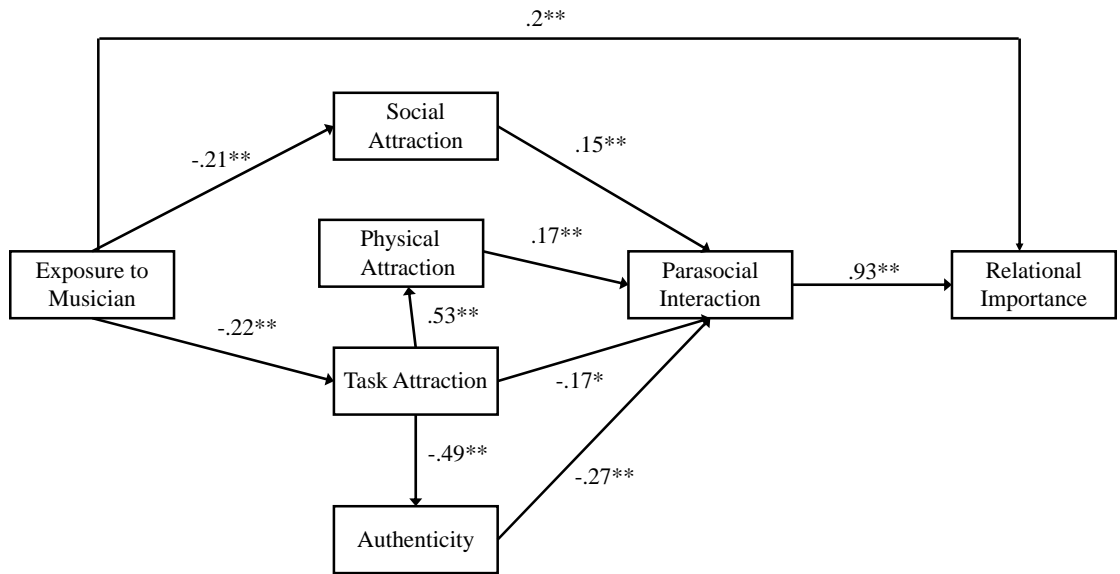


Figure 3: Final Path Model

## DISCUSSION

Results from the analysis revealed that the relationships consumers have with musicians are in fact quite different from other parasocial relationships. The present research set out to test the decades-old parasocial relationship importance model as laid out by Rubin and McHugh (1987). Results indicate that only three of the originally predicted paths were significant in the case of audience relationships with musicians.

The revised model predicted a number of direct effects. First, H1 predicted that increased exposure to a favorite musician leads to increased parasocial relationships such that individuals who reported higher levels of exposure reported higher levels of parasocial relational importance with the musician. This aligns with past research on new media and parasocial relationships, which have found that increased exposure to new media (e.g., Twitter, social networking sites) was related to higher levels of parasocial

interaction (Frederick et al., 2012; Baek et al., 2013; Stever & Lawson, 2013; Kurtin et al., 2018). Thus, it is not surprising to find H1 confirmed.

Next, it was predicted that social media exposure would be positively associated with attraction towards the musician (H2a, H2b, and H2c). The present study found no support for these assumptions. Previous research has demonstrated that exposure to media characters leads to task, physical, and social attraction (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). In the current research with musicians, a very different relationship was found. Consistent with research on parasocial relationships with YouTube (Kurtin et al., 2018), no relationship between exposure to the favored musician and task attraction was confirmed. This finding echoes research by Rubin and Step (2000). In their study on parasocial relationships with talk radio hosts, Rubin and Step (2000) found that task attraction did not emerge as a significant direct predictor of parasocial relationship development. However, task attraction *was* found to be a significant predictor for seeking credible information from a radio talk show host (Rubin & Step, 2000). In their discussion, Rubin and Step (2000) suggest that listeners may have developed parasocial relationships because of the perceived credibility of the radio talk show host. This may help to explain the relationships among these variables in the current study as well. While increased exposure does not directly contribute to task attraction, the revised model shows that task attraction is related to both authenticity and parasocial relationship. Here we can relate authenticity as a musician to credibility as a news caster since both can be described as important characteristics for the job.

Turning to social and physical attraction, these data suggest negative relationships between media exposure and both social attraction and physical attraction. This implies that the more exposure consumers have to their favorite musicians, the less attractive they find them. One explanation for this counterintuitive finding can be explained by the “less is more effect” (Norton & Frost, 2007). In their research on familiarity, Norton and Frost (2007) note that while it is a common belief that learning more about others leads to greater liking, results from their research indicated that more information about others leads, on average, to less liking. In order to further understand this, Norton and Frost explain that ambiguity, or lacking information about another, instead led to liking, whereas familiarity bred contempt. The authors explain that this “less is more effect” is

the consequence of increasing dissimilarity perceived by the viewer. The authors explain that once audiences uncover evidence of dissimilarity, new information is more likely to be interpreted as further evidence of increased dissimilarity, leading to decreased liking. For instance, in a review of how new forms of mediated interpersonal communication has influenced parasocial interactions, Hartmann (2008) proposes that greater perceived distance felt between individuals and media characters could potentially weaken parasocial relationships. The 117 million people following Beyoncé on Twitter are witnessing her travel the world with her husband, play sold-out shows center stage, take naps on yachts, and do a whole host of other unattainable activities. The 50 million people turning in to watch Katy Perry for 96-hours observed make-up artists, personal chefs, voice coaches, and numerous costume changes throughout the day. These activities are also unattainable to the average consumer, potentially increasing dissimilarity as well as liking.

However, another possibility is that the increased access we have to celebrities as ‘real’ people may in fact work against an aspirational logic of parasocial relationship development. Most research on parasocial relationships examines the connection audiences feel with scripted characters. These characters have been painstakingly and deliberately crafted by writers and producers to present idealized tropes (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Coming at this finding from another direction, it is also plausible that familiarity breeds contempt, not because celebrities and musicians are so *dissimilar* to audiences, but because they are so unbearably human and ordinary. This finding relationship between exposure and attraction suggests that additional research on the degree to which we seek to idolize or identify with particular celebrities or characters is an important avenue for future work.

Social, task, and physical attraction were each predicted to be related to parasocial interaction (H3a, H3b, H3c) as well as to the importance of a parasocial relationship with the musician (H4a, H4b, H4c). The results of the current study support the predicted positive relationships between task and physical attraction and parasocial relationships, replicating Rubin and McHugh’s (1987) results (H3). However, contrary to previous research which found positive relationships between all types of attraction and the importance of a relationship with a television or social media personality (Frederick, et al.,

2012; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985), here physical and social attraction were shown to be positively related, while task attraction was negatively related to the parasocial relationship with musicians. Our results demonstrated that only exposure to the musician and parasocial relationships impacted relationship importance directly.

Uses and gratifications (Blumler & Katz, 1974) points to one possible explanation for differences in attraction types and the importance of a parasocial relationship with the musician: perhaps, given how unlikely audiences are to develop an authentic relationship with a musician, social media activity around musicians presents a way for music lovers to forge social relationships with other *fans*, rather than cultivating a parasocial relationship with the musician (Yates, 2015). Yates (2015) argues that, because media platforms such as fan websites lack face-to-face opportunities for fans to engage with their favorite musicians, the gratification audiences derive from engaging with media content is connection with others who share their enthusiasm for the musician.

The confirmation of H5, which links parasocial interaction to the perceived importance of a relationship with a musician further supports the need for continued research in this area. Consistent with developmental theories of interpersonal relationships (Buss, 1989), support for H5 reinforces that mere attraction is not enough: for a parasocial relationship to develop and become meaningful, a sequence or accumulation of interactions must take place over time, and potentially across a number of media platforms.

The exploration of authenticity as a mediating variable between media exposure and parasocial relationships (RQ1) reveals a novel and compelling aspect of parasocial relationship development. A simple direct mediation was not noted but a new path from media exposure through authenticity to task attraction and then parasocial relationship was discovered. This path underscores the role of authenticity in parasocial relationships. Cohen and Tyler (2016) found that when fans discover that social media posts from public figures are written by professional writers or PR agents (a phenomenon known as “ghost tweeting,”) their assessment of the celebrity’s authenticity declines. Cohen and Tyler (2016) found a link between authenticity and perceptions of social distance, in which increased authenticity was related to increases in parasocial interactions. Work by Chung



(2017) found a relationship between authenticity and credibility such that source trustworthiness was based on how authentic or ‘real’ the posts from celebrities were.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The present study reveals important nuances in the construction of parasocial relationships, but reveals challenges in the application to the social media context of measures originally developed for traditional media. The primary limitation of this study is that the attraction scale received a very low alpha reliability score. We relied on the use of established scales which were lightly adapted in order to situate this progressive research within the context of parasocial relationships which unfold across both traditional and social social media. Validated scales were carefully adapted to emphasize the study’s focus on musicians as a special case. Specifically, measurement for social media exposure sought to measure participants’ exposure to their favorite musicians on social media. However, it is plausible that the scale more accurately reflects participants’ exposure to *information* about music and musicians on social media. The difference is subtle, but instructive.

Exciting opportunities for additional research abound in this arena. Future studies may benefit from more rigorous development of specific subscales which better measure participant use of social media. It would also be interesting to extend this study with interviews in order to uncover the language that consumers are currently using to discuss issues of attraction, and even perhaps create new scales which better capture the uniqueness of social media and blended platforms for consumer engagement with celebrities. This research suggests that concepts like “oversharing,” and “celebrity saturation” may yield additional insight. A second opportunity for future research could draw on the limited research on parasocial breakups to better understand the conditions under which these relationships come to an end, and to identify the inflection point at which exposure promotes withdrawal from the parasocial relationship. Recent coverage of musicians and actors whose inappropriate or predatory behavior have been documented by the #MeToo movement further suggests that future work can examine whether and how parasocial relationships are influenced by negative media and social media coverage. Finally, the mixed results of this study suggest that increasingly online access to music, musicians and other public figures may require us to more fully account for what we seek

from these figures. Whether we desire the familiar or fantastic invites us to return to the uses and gratifications framework and more deliberately integrate it with the parasocial relationship model. In addition, the phenomenon of decreased liking through increased access invites researchers to investigate those processes which work against the development of parasocial relationships.

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