

In Search of Catharsis: Trump and Parasocial Predictors of Social Media Use Integration

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Research in social media usage is extending beyond analyses of various high-traffic platforms and the average time users spend online. Developments of newer research explore the functions and motivators of social media use integration (SMUI). SMUI assesses the adoption of social media usage into everyday life as well as the emotional components that accompany the integration process. Similarly, researchers are considering parasocial relationships (PSRs) from the viewpoint that PSRs are a means of integration of mediated content into everyday life.

The present study explores PSRs with President Donald Trump as drivers of greater social media use integration. Results indicate that the catharsis function of PSRs with Trump is a significant predictor of SMUI with gender impacting both the variety and valence attributes of PSRs.

Keywords: Trump, parasocial relationships, PSR, social media use integration, SMUI, imagined interaction, II, survey, regression

The concept of social media use integration (SMUI) is receiving increasing amounts of scholarly attention as researchers attempt to understand both the uses and functions of social media, as well as its diffusion and user integration into daily life. The present study proposes that one path to social media integration may be through parasocial relationships (PSRs) with mediated personae. PSRs are defined as one-sided relationships (e.g., Horton & Wohl, 1957) that media consumers form with individuals they view within that mediated context. Such relationships can be explored through studies of a PSR's functions in an individual's everyday life and thorough analyses of the attributes that a PSR exhibits. Considering President Donald Trump's escalated use of Twitter to communicate with his online audience, a more comprehensive array of social media users have developed varying types

and degrees of PSRs with the former president. This study intends to identify those functions and attributes of PSRs with Trump that may lead to greater adoption of social media usage and day-to-day integration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Use Integration (SMUI)

Social media is progressively becoming a primary medium for communication (Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2013). Studies that explore social media often operate with the basic assumption that the use of social media leads to certain observable effects that are somehow correlated with usage. However, the reality of media effects is far more complicated.

One specific area of ongoing research, social media use integration (SMUI), considers how people integrate into their daily lives the routines, attitudes, and connections adopted through the usage of social media (Correa et al., 2010; Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2013). Assessing SMUI includes considering the integration of social media into daily life and the emotional attachments accompanying integration (Jenkins-Guarnieri et al. 2013). One phenomenon that may drive greater SMUI involves parasocial relationships with mediated personae, as manifested by imagined interactions (IIs) beyond viewing encounters.

Parasocial Relationships and Imagined Interaction (II)

PSRs are an essential field of study for many researchers' exploration of audience-persona relationships (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000). Typically, people who watch television tend to experience some degree of a parasocial interaction (PSI) with a mediated persona, (Perse & Rubin, 1989) and as a result, an expanding body of research (e.g., Caughey, 1984; Dibble et al., 2016; Klimmt et al., 2006; Schiappa et al, 2005; Rubin, et al., 1985) has assessed the many determinants and outcomes of PSIs with mediated personae. The development of a PSR from a PSI is one such outcome. Although PSRs share many components of real-life relationships, they tend to lack the behavioral elements and certain intensity levels (Cohen, 2003) that are generally found within interpersonal relationships. This highlights the belief that PSRs may more closely resemble relationships that individuals have with "good neighbors" rather than with close friends and family (Gleich, 1997).

A PSR develops when an audience member forms a one-sided relationship with a mediated “persona” (Horton & Wohl, 1956). When a person engages in a PSI with a performer in mass media, a PSR can begin to form. Such media performers can include (Dibble et al., 2016) an actor or actress, television character, political candidate, or athlete, among several other media personality roles. The functions of PSRs surpass those of PSIs (e.g., Cummins & Cui, 2014; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Klimmt et al., 2006) in that these relationships become an influential aspect of a person’s life.

Imagined interactions (IIs) foster a PSI’s development into a PSR (Madison & Porter, 2015; Madison & Porter, 2016; Madison et al., 2016). IIs are a type of functional daydreaming through which people construct cognitive scripts for anticipated future interactions (Honeycutt, 2003; 2010). After exposure to media content, a viewer often engages in mental activities that can generate changes in their behavior (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Such mental activities often include IIs involving a mediated persona (Madison & Porter, 2015; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2018).

Different cultures worldwide engage with IIs much differently than those in the Western world. For example, IIs with significant figures such as gods, goddesses, or mythical creatures are more common among people from non-Western cultures (Caughey, 1984). In contrast, people in the Western world more often have IIs with personae delivered online or through television (Caughey, 1984).

Madison and Porter (2015; 2016) argue that continuous IIs with a mediated persona leads to the development and reinforcement of a PSR through a selective viewing process, which increases viewer exposure to a particular mediated persona. That is, a PSI influences the development of a relationship with a mediated persona, which in turn may transform into a deeper audience-persona relationship driven by IIs. As a result of the relationship formation, exposure to the persona increases, affecting how the audience perceives and interacts with the world.

Much like with IIs, the functions and attributes of a PSR can be used to assess a relationship (see Honeycutt, 2010). The functions of PSRs include relationship maintenance, conflict linkage, self-understanding, compensation, and rehearsal (Madison & Porter, 2015). Honeycutt et al.’s (2015) classification of IIs as intrapersonal communication with real-life acquaintances aligns with Madison et al.’s (2020) data on the

functions of PSRs with Alex Jones, an ultra-right-wing radio/TV/Internet talk show host. Madison et al. (2020) found that conflict linkage, compensation, and self-understanding are positive predictors of a PSR development with Alex Jones. In contrast, catharsis acts as a significant negative predictor of viewing the media personality. In Honeycutt et. al's (2015) study, these were also the most frequently reported functions with IIs.

Attributes of Parasocial Relationships

In addition to the practical functions of IIs and PSRs, researchers have also observed different attributes associated with these relationships. Based on II theory (e.g., Honeycutt, 2003; Honeycutt, 2010), the attributes of PSRs include retroactivity, frequency, variety, valence, specificity, and self-dominance (Madison & Porter, 2016).

Retroactivity within IIs refers to reflections of previous interpersonal or mediated interactions (television, film, radio, books). Retroactivity within PSRs involves scenarios that a person creates within the imagination. Madison & Porter, (2016) argued that people do this recurrently and often add a variety of their imagined content into the scenario. The researchers indicated that the correlation between retroactivity and valence signified that IIs are usually pleasant. When individuals visualize themselves in an imagined scenario, they tend to function as equal participants with the mediated personae depicted in the interaction. The retroactivity attribute of PSRs also correlates with the variety attribute within the original TV content in our minds. Through the process of building and rehearsing cognitive scripts, people often add variety (Madison & Porter, 2016).

Within PSRs, retroactivity suggests the same conclusion that a range of TV critics (i.e., Mander, 1978; Postman, 1985) offer— television may limit us to the primary components of the TV reality we have viewed. Alternatively, as well as “borrowing” concepts and beliefs from television, people do retroactive imaginative work (Madison & Porter, 2016). These ideas suggest that TV shows provide people with starting points from which their imaginations can fill in the blanks or add details that fit the visualization of the content within the audience's minds. Both II and PSR literature establish retroactivity as a function of imagined interaction and parasocial relationships. The present study focuses on the other attributes of PSRs, which have received less attention in social media usage research.

Frequency is the second characterization of a PSR, which occurs when a person

thinks about a mediated persona. Chory-Assad and Yanen (2005) used the term "frequency" in terms of PSI to express how often a person views their favorite performer. However, the researchers found no relationship between the frequency of exposure and the nature of a PSI. Nonetheless, Madison and Porter (2016) found that the frequency of imagined interaction with mediated personae after viewing shares a strong correlation with the variety and retroactivity attributes. People who frequently imagine themselves interacting with mediated characters often reflect on scenes witnessed on television and test outcome contingencies by adding other elements, typically their own (Madison & Porter, 2015).

Honeycutt (2010) explored the concept of imaginatively testing contingencies as a function of IIs and analyzed how this aspect is key to a person's self-understanding and rehearsal of imagined interactions. IIs, whether occurring with real people or TV characters, assist in the development of cognitive dialogues for later use in face-to-face interactions. In PSRs, the frequency of IIs with various mediated personae concerns the reoccurrence of audience reflections of mediated scenarios (Madison & Porter, 2016) that are seen on television or through other electronic media channels. Frequency is associated with ranging functions and characteristics of PSRs and IIs, as the element has "primarily been viewed as a positive element of close relationships" (Bodie et al., 2013, p. 160). PSRs are one-sided, affecting a perceived sense of "closeness" with a mediated persona.

A variety of people, places, and concepts within imagined content are relative to the frequency of thinking about mediated personae (Honeycutt, 2003). A more comprehensive assortment of audience imaginative work within PSRs can reflect that mediated personae, primarily TV and video game characters, have become more compelling (Johnson, 2006). Having a greater variety of characters and scenarios offers numerous new imaginative elements with which to work. Amidst an unprecedented volume of entertainment and imaginative content available through emerging online platforms and streaming services, individuals have more opportunities to develop PSRs with multiple mediated personae, as well as particular shows themselves. Furthermore, with Facebook and other social media outlets available for individuals to share their imaginative material, these effects may become reinforced and more enduring (Madison & Porter, 2015).

Specificity is distinct from the variety attribute in that it describes the level of

detail in the imagery involved in a PSR (Zagacki et al., 1992; Honeycutt, 2010). Specificity is a characteristic often associated with diverse dimensions of conversational sensitivity and secure attachment styles. Madison & Porter (2015) suggested that specificity in PSRs may result more from a personality or other inherent trait of an individual rather than a characteristic of the PSR itself.

Valence, as Honeycutt (2010) defined it, refers to the "amount and diversity of emotions that are experienced while envisioning conversation" (p. 5). The valence of IIs regularly differs based on gender; some researchers have found that women tend to have more pleasant IIs than men (Honeycutt et al., 1989-1990). As applicable to PSRs, valence is a continuum varying from positive affect to negative affect. The concern of one's perception of an imagined scenario is often negatively or positively correlated with the self-dominance attribute (Honeycutt et al., 1998-1999).

McCann et al. (2006) explained how Americans are more self-dominant in IIs than collectivistic cultures, as seen in Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. The self-dominance trait is likely due to the strong values affiliated with the American individualistic culture. Honeycutt, 2010 states that "self-dominance occurs when individuals imagine they are doing most of the talking in their IIs" (p. 4). Self-dominance is associated with rehearsal, proactivity, and retroactivity, as well as with unpleasant IIs. These characteristics are rather crucial to understanding intrapersonal communication characterized as self-dominant. Self-dominance is also a particularly important concept to study regarding PSRs. PSRs are one-sided (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and self-dominance is likely to be a variable associated with—or affected by—religious or other culturally-oriented variables prominent within a sample of participants (McCann et al., 2006).

Functions of Parasocial Relationships

Like IIs, PSRs can be assessed regarding their functions (see Honeycutt, 2010). The functions of PSRs include conflict linkage, catharsis, and self-understanding (Madison & Porter, 2015). People can maintain connections with mediated personae through imaginative relationship maintenance. Often, imaginative work involves conflict linkage within the audience's own lives and the engagement of the people with whom they have PSRs. Conflict is associated with ruminating in IIs (Honeycutt, 2003; 2010), which is highly common in relationships between mediated personae (Comstock & Stryzewski,

1990) and, anecdotally, the comments sections of various news sites and other websites.

Catharsis, a sense of relief or release, is a function of both IIs (e.g., Honeycutt, 2010) and PSRs (Madison & Porter, 2015). Catharsis is the most frequently reported function of imagined interaction (Honeycutt et al., 2015). Madison & Porter, (2015) found that within PSRs, cathartic experiences are an instrumental discriminating variable between people reporting low and high levels of PSI. This finding indicates catharsis may play a role in forming the PSR after a PSI induced by exposure to a mediated persona.

Finally, PSRs function similarly to IIs as a means of self-understanding. Imagining an interaction with personae from electronic media helps the viewer assemble thoughts, clarify viewpoints, and better understand one's own perspective. Savage and Spence (2014) suggested that many listeners seek to have their opinions confirmed by radio hosts, while others may explore opposing viewpoints to pick apart arguments. Mediated personae provide audiences with imaginary conversation partners whom they may use to develop internal scripts for later face-to-face interactions. In Madison and Porter's (2015) study, those who reported higher levels of PSI also reported higher levels of self-understanding, catharsis, and relationship maintenance in their PSRs.

PSRs and Social Media Use

A developing area of research currently examines the role of PSRs in social media use, particularly among YouTube celebrities. Rasmussen (2018) investigated the roles of credibility and PSIs with YouTube celebrities regarding consumer purchase intentions. Results found that PSIs with YouTube celebrities show similarities to PSIs with soap operas, athletes, and others. Dai et al. (2016) explored the role of perceived credibility in parasocial interactions and found that increased PSIs with celebrities lead audiences to sense greater perceptions of credibility. Researchers primarily view parasocial interaction as something that occurs during a viewing experience (e.g., Dibble et al., 2016; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2018). However, a parasocial relationship often develops beyond the viewing experience (Dibble et al., 2016; Madison & Porter, 2015).

The present study focuses on PSRs with Donald Trump and how certain functions and attributes of PSRs may lead to greater SMUI. This concept is particularly of scholarly interest, as the former president is notorious for an aggressive online presence— a drastic break from the social media habits of his predecessors.

Trump's Escalation of Social Media Use During the Presidency

Generally conservative and hesitant to change, governments and municipalities were slow to adopt online communication methods with constituents and voters. Early research has suggested that governments could use social media to better monitor and understand constituents' political interests; such research has even proposed analytical frameworks to do so (Stieglitz, & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Meanwhile, the discussion of how governments might proactively use social media to help increase understanding, communication, and participation within its audience began to occur. Governments utilizing online methods of communication raises the issue that these forms of communication come with risks. (See for example Criado, et al., 2013; Picazo-Vela et al., 2012.) Nonetheless, the adoption of these methods was relatively straightforward and slow—especially at the level of the US presidency.

President George W. Bush and his predecessors used minimal social media while in office. Since the technology was in the early phases of adoption within society, the government was careful in partaking in the new method of communication. Beginning with his presidential campaign, President Barack Obama garnered media attention by adopting these more contemporary forms of communication, allowing him and his staff to bypass mass media and communicate directly with constituents. (Cogburn, & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Katz et al., 2013). Considered the first “digital media presidency,” the Obama administration maintained a social media presence to increase the avenues of traditional presidential communication styles. Donald Trump, however, eventually took this step much further.

Donald J. Trump has been a media persona for decades. Before his presidential run, most Americans knew him from the popular TV show, *The Apprentice*. Some research suggests that his celebrity role provided Donald Trump, much like Ronald Reagan, an opportunity to cash in on existing PSRs developed in the minds of key potential voters, his TV audience (Gabriel et al., 2018).

Among the popular media, many discussions have occurred about Donald Trump's usage of social media during his presidential campaign and four-year term. Political pundits and news-watchers have commented on the former president's significantly increased frequency of Twitter usage, specifically the often informal, sometimes vulgar,

and arguably factually inaccurate nature of the communications. Scholarly research has dissected his communication style within his campaigning (Ahmadian et al., 2017; Kreis, 2017; Ott, 2016). Studies suggest a potential change in Americans' societal expectations of how critical figures within the White House communicate, as social media has primarily affected President Trump and other politicians' communication choices (Scacco & Coe, 2017; Sacco et al., 2018). Given that online communication is more frequent and direct, it is proposed that opportunities to develop a PSR with the president have increased. Additionally, the relationship between the functions and attributes of PSRs and an individual's level of social media use integration deserves exploration.

The purpose of the current research is to determine which functions and attributes of respondents' parasocial relationships (PSRs) with President Donald Trump can predict social media use integration (SMUI). Through exploring PSRs with Trump, findings from this study may help researchers better understand the possibility of audience incorporation of the president's ideologies as delivered through social media into their worldviews and communication interactions. Based on prior research, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1: Which functions of PSRs with Donald Trump predict greater social media use integration?

RQ2: Which attributes of PSRs with Donald Trump predict greater social media use integration?

RQ3: How do demographic variables affect how functions and attributes of PSRs with Donald Trump predict social media use integration?

METHODS

Procedure

After receiving IRB approval from two prominent southern universities in the US, researchers administered online surveys to students enrolled in diversified communication courses at both universities. Surveys were programmed into Qualtrics, and students received course credit for participating. Responses remained anonymous, and students received participation credit by showing a printout or screenshot of the closing page of the survey to the researchers. Data were then loaded into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis.

Participants

Responding participants ($N = 454$) were 56% female and 44% male. A total of 70% were White/Caucasian, 18% Black/African American, 3% Hispanic, 3% mixed races, 4% other races, and 2% preferred not to say. The race variable was later collapsed into a binary variable of White = 0 and Not White/Other = 1. 94% percent were never married, and 96% were aged 18-24.

Measures

Measures of the attributes of imagined interactions were created from an abbreviated version of Madison and Porter's (2016) parasocial relationship (PSR) scales which themselves were derived from Honeycutt's (2010) imagined interaction scales. The top-two highest-loading items from the dimensions identified in Madison & Porter's (2016) analyses were used to create 2-item scales measuring each function of parasocial relationships. The procedure was repeated using Madison & Porter's (2015) factor analysis of attributes of PSRs to produce 2-item attribute scales. Additional items were added to the conflict, self-understanding, and catharsis scales from Honeycutt's (2010) II scales to create more robust function measurements. Each was contextualized to reflect imagined interactions with President Donald Trump. All items were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from "never" to "all of the time" as possible responses.

An example of an item from the frequency scale includes, "I imagine myself interacting with Donald Trump many times throughout the week," and a sample from the self-understanding scale includes, "Imagining a conversation with Donald Trump helps me understand my feelings about him." Items were combined into scales reflecting the functions and attributes identified in the literature (Table 1).

Table 1: *Scale Properties*

Variable	N-Scale Items	N	M	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Functions					
Self-Understanding	2	445	1.67	.86	.92
Conflict Linkage	2	437	1.67	.81	.86
Catharsis	2	454	1.54	.83	.87
Attributes					
Frequency	2	454	1.39	.76	.92
Retroactivity	2	445	1.67	.91	.91
Variety	2	454	1.77	.95	.79
Valence	2	445	1.88	1.20	.94
Specificity	2	443	1.51	.83	.78
Social Media Use Integration	9	454	1.79	.75	.90

Social media use integration (SMUI) was developed using “rigorous scale development methods” by Jenkins-Guarnieri et al. (2013). The SMUI Scale is comprised of 9 items that load onto two dimensions: social integration/emotional connection and integration into social routines. Respondents were asked on 5-point Likert scales their levels of agreement with a series of statements regarding integrating social media into everyday life.

An example of an item that measures social integration/emotional connection includes “I prefer to communicate with others mainly through Facebook.” An example of an item measuring integration into social routines includes “Using Facebook is part of my daily routine.”

RESULTS

A hierarchical regression using functions, attributes, and demographics as predictors of SMUI was used to answer all three RQs. The first model (Table 2: *Hierarchical Regression of Functions on SMUI*) addressed RQ1 by looking at the PSR functions that predict SMUI. PSR attributes were then added into the second model (Table 3: *Hierarchical Regression of Functions and Attributes on SMUI*). In the third model, demographic questions were added to the variables from the second model (Table 4: *Hierarchical Regression of Functions, Attributes, and Demographics on SMUI*).

RQ1 asked, “Which functions of PSRs with Donald Trump predict greater social media use integration?” The first model in the hierarchical regression revealed only the

catharsis function as a predictor of SMUI ($\beta = 0.34, p < .01$) of SMUI. Self-understanding ($\beta = 0.02, p = n.s.$) and conflict linkage ($\beta = -0.02, p = n.s.$) failed to predict SMUI $F(3, 417) = 20.41; R^2 = .13; p < .01$. See Table 2: *Hierarchical Regression of Functions on SMUI* for greater details.

Table 2: *Hierarchical Regression of Functions, Attributes, and Demographics on SMUI*

	B	SE(B)	β	<i>t</i>	Sig.(<i>p</i>)
Functions					
Self-Understanding	.02	.06	.02	0.37	.71
Conflict	-.00	.06	.00	0.03	.98
Catharsis	.36	.09	.34	4.19	.00

$R^2 = .12$

RQ2 asked, “Which attributes of PSRs with Donald Trump predict greater social media use integration?” When adding attributes to the second model, catharsis remained a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.31, p < .01$) and variety emerged as a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -0.18, p < .05$) of SMUI while frequency ($\beta = -0.10, p = n.s.$), retroactivity ($\beta = 0.02, p = n.s.$), valence ($\beta = 0.09, p = n.s.$), and specificity ($\beta = 0.15, p = n.s.$) failed to predict SMUI; $F(3, 412) = 9.26; R^2 = .15; p < .01$. See Table 3: *Hierarchical Regression of Functions and Attributes on SMUI*.

Table 3: *Hierarchical Regression of Functions and Attributes on SMUI*

	B	SE(B)	β	<i>t</i>	Sig.(<i>p</i>)
Functions					
Self-Understanding	.01	.07	.01	0.11	.92
Conflict	.07	.07	.07	.96	.34
Catharsis	.33	.09	.31	3.69	.00
Attributes					
Frequency	-.10	.07	-.10	-1.45	.15
Retroactivity	.02	.07	.02	.27	.79
Variety	-.14	.06	-.18	-2.22	.03
Valence	.06	.04	.09	1.30	.19
Specificity	.13	.08	.15	1.60	.11

$R^2 = .14$

RQ3 asked, “How do demographics affect the ways in which functions and attributes of PSR with Donald Trump predict social media use integration?” To explore

this question, researchers added gender and race (as dummy variables), age, and income to the third model. When controlling for these demographics, catharsis remained a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.31, p < .01$), variety became a marginally significant predictor ($\beta = -0.18, p = .06$), valence emerged as a positive predictor, and variety emerged as a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.14, p < .05$) of SMUI. Being female ($\beta = 0.27, p < .01$) was the only demographic factor that emerged as a predictor of SMUI; $F(12, 408) = 10.21; R^2 = .23; p < .01$. See Table 4: *Hierarchical Regression of Functions, Attributes, and Demographics on SMUI*.

Table 4: *Hierarchical Regression of Functions, Attributes, and Demographics on SMUI*

	B	SE(B)	β	<i>t</i>	Sig.(<i>p</i>)
Functions					
Self-Understanding	.01	.07	.01	.08	.94
Conflict	.08	.07	.09	1.24	.22
Catharsis	.33	.09	.31	3.82	.00
Attributes					
Frequency	-.06	.07	-.06	-.88	.38
Retroactivity	-.04	.07	-.05	-.58	.56
Variety	-.11	.06	-.14	-1.85	.06
Valence	.09	.04	.14	1.98	.05
Specificity	.14	.08	.15	1.74	.08
Demographics					
Gender (M=0; F=1)	.41	.07	.27	5.94	.00
Race (White=0; Other=1)	-.12	.08	-.07	-1.61	.11
Age	.09	.10	.04	.96	.34
Income	-.00	.01	-.02	-.35	.65

$R^2 = .21$

DISCUSSION

This study revealed several compelling findings regarding the influence PSRs have on SMUI. Most notably, the catharsis function of PSRs and the lack of variety consistently emerged as predictors of SMUI. Positive valence of PSRs with Trump only became significant when controlling for gender.

The variety attribute predicted SMUI but lost some significance when accounting for gender. Variety refers to the diversity of people, places, and things involved in the imaginative work (Honeycutt, 2010) of a PSR (Madison & Porter, 2015). By definition, SMUI integrates social media into the lives of users. Repeatedly, individuals' social

identities are confirmed by the sites that they selectively access to validate their self-concepts and worldviews (Sheldon et al., 2019).

Valence became a predictor when accounting for gender. Prior research has shown that women have more positively-valenced IIs than men (Honeycutt, 2003; Honeycutt et al., 2016), as well as greater memories of conversations. Even more so, women are more likely to use social media forums for self-help than men due to aspects of socialization and regular networking (Sheldon et al., 2015; Sheldon et al., 2019). As a result, women tend to experience greater social media use integration than men.

While Honeycutt et al. (2015) identified catharsis as one of the most common functions of IIs, Madison & Porter (2015) found that cathartic experiences with PSRs were a substantial discriminating variable between people reporting low levels of PSI and those reporting high levels of PSI. This suggests that catharsis may play a role in forming a PSR itself, with the PSR promoting increased contact with a mediated persona through social media or other means.

As catharsis can alleviate anxiety and allow for emotional release within individuals, this aspect of a PSR can relieve social tension and inclusivity needs as outlined in interpersonal needs theory (*see* Schutz, 1958). Inclusion is the need for belonging. Oversocials may seek inclusion and crave the spotlight social media provides, whereas undersocials may feel the opposite and find solace within outside means. Hence, oversocials may fulfill social needs through developing relationships within a virtual community. Therefore, the net effect is heavier social media integration within oversocials due to the formation of a PSR.

When considering the significant findings together, a particular theory emerges. Catharsis as a function of PSRs and a lack of variety in imaginative content were demonstrated as consistent predictors of SMUI. This suggests that regardless of an individual's opinions of Trump, a desire for catharsis drives SMUI— through searching for related content or interactions within a social media context. Since valence only emerged as a predictor of SMUI when controlling for gender (and other demographics), being female and having a positive PSR with Trump were predictive of SMUI. Therefore, a PSR with Trump encouraged by a desire for catharsis is significantly associated with the greater integration of social media into people's lives.

Limitations and Further Research

A significant number of limitations in the present research should be acknowledged before advancing the findings from the present study. As the sample was comprised of college students enrolled in communication courses at two universities, the generalizability of the results is subject to question. Future research should expand the sample to reflect a larger population of social media users.

Second, the data in this survey is cross-sectional and correlational. Claims of causality cannot be made based on this data. Future research should take repeated measures to test the direction of effects between PSR functions and SMUI.

Third, participation was self-selected. Students had options to take other surveys for course credit yet chose the present study. There may be inherent differences between the students who chose this survey and those who opted for an alternative.

Fourth, the prominent age range of the sample (18-24) is typically less politically involved, and their political alignments may not yet have “crystallized.” Moreover, people are dynamic, and views are subject to change throughout lifespans. As a result, we are left with some questions regarding the stability of the PSR measures over time.

Lastly, the present study reveals the relationship between the functions and attributes of PSRs with Trump and SMUI. Still, it is impossible to know the nature of any imaginative content among respondents, which in effect is a limitation of the survey method using psychometric scales. Future research should explore longer-form self-reports to assess the scope of PSRs as it relates to SMUI.

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Funding and Acknowledgements

The authors declare no funding sources or conflicts of interest.

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