Friends in books: The influence of character attributes and the reading experience on parasocial relationships and romances

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ABSTRACT

While studies on parasocial relationship (PSR) have been conducted for nearly 60 years in various media contexts, research on PSR with book characters has been neglected so far. To close this gap, this study takes a first step in investigating the fundamental connections between different dimensions of the reading experience and the constitution of PSR, especially parasocial romance (PSROM). A survey of 493 adults indicates that ease of cognitive access enables PSR, mediated by reading pleasure and the feeling of presence. In addition, the degree of reality helps to establish a PSR, mediated by the personal relevance of the story. Moreover, the perceived similarity between a reader and a book character, and the attractiveness of his or her physical and mental character influence the development of a PSR, whereas only physical attractiveness influences a PSROM.

1. Introduction

A book, a radio broadcast, the current blockbuster movie, the latest computer game—while these entertainment offerings may be as different as can be, they are all usually constructed around media characters that enable media users to feel intimately connected to the story and to develop an emotional bond through sharing the thrill of the character's adventure.

Various scientific concepts have been established concerning the processes and relationships between media characters and media users. One key concept is parasocial interactions and relationships. A parasocial interaction (PSI) refers to the interaction between a media character and a media user that occurs strictly during media reception; in contrast, a parasocial relationship (PSR) is not confined to the interaction during reception, but may become something similar to a real or almost real relationship (Schramm, 2008). The majority of investigations of parasocial phenomena assume that these interactions and relationships are of an amicable nature (e.g., Auter & Moore, 1993; Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Eyal & Cohen,2006). However, since 2010, and particularly during the last two years, there has been a trend towards including not only amicable but also romantic facets of parasocial phenomena (e.g., Driesmans, Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2016; Erickson & Cin, 2017), with the assumption that these romantic attachments are marked by emotional, physical, and sexual attraction (Tukachinsky, 2010). Although recent conceptualizations of romantic parasocial phenomena are theoretically equal, they use different labels (cf. Tukachinsky, 2010, versus Adam & Sizemore, 2013). In the current study, the term "parasocial romance" (PSROM), originally introduced by Adam and Sizemore (2013), is used to describe PSR that move beyond amicable and include emotional, physical, and sexual attraction. During the 60 years since Horton and Wohl (1956) first introduced the term "parasocial", many studies on PSI and PSR have been conducted on various types of media characters and using different kinds of media, such as movies and computer games. However, little research has been conducted on either PSI or PSR in the context of books. Books tell their stories predominantly with written words and do not normally use sounds or moving images, as movies or computer games do, for example. Hence, they differ in terms of information coding (visual versus audiovisual)

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and modality (verbal versus pictorial). Research on information processing indicates the predominance of multimodal and multicodal media, and assumes that media such as TV affect information processing in a positive way, leading to a higher level of elaboration compared with books (e.g. Mayer, 2001). If this is the case, then it would seem unwise to merely transfer the insights into parasocial phenomenon gained in the context of television to the context of books, because people process the information from the two types of media differently.

Furthermore, while PSI have been investigated in connection with other single dimensions of reception (e.g., the realism of the storyline or the experience of presence), the interrelationships between these different dimensions have never been compared, nor have they been compared with longer-term constructs, like PSR, that extend beyond a single experience of reception. Do readers form more intensive PSR when they perceive the plot of the book to be more realistic, because it seems to be more similar and relevant to their own life? Do reading flow and pleasure predict the feeling of presence, and does this in turn enhance the intensity of PSR? Questions such as these have not been answered to date, and yet doing so would provide meaningful insights into how parasocial phenomena develop and which factors matter in the long-term bond between media characters and the audience.

Finally, studies to date have generally not explored the full range of possible relationships between the audience and media characters. In most cases, PSI and PSR have been investigated in the context of positive, amicable relationships, while neglecting other kinds of PSR such as negative or romantic relationships (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Tukachinsky, 2010). Recent studies have tended to include a wider range of parasocial phenomena and moved beyond solely studying amicable PSI/PSR. This is particularly relevant in the context of books—a medium that is famous, among other things, for giving the audience private insights into the thoughts and motivations of the protagonists. In doing so, books generally offer the audience a greater chance to reconstruct a media character's motivations and feelings than films can offer. This might strengthen the way we feel about a media character, regardless of whether the feeling is amicable, hateful, or romantic. Studying the different facets of PSR in the context of books could thus provide promising insights into the development and their influencing factors of parasocial phenomena in general.

To address these research gaps, we conducted the first quantitative study of PSR in the context of book characters, and examined the interrelationships among different dimensions of media reception with PSR and PSROM to provide a richer and more nuanced perspective on parasocial phenomena.

2. Theory

2.1. The parasocial phenomenon

The term "parasocial" was initially used by Horton and Wohl (1956) to describe media users' social responses to media characters. Their study is regarded as the starting point of research on PSI and PSR. According to their original definition of PSI, the interactions between media users and media characters are similar to the face-to-face interactions between two real individuals. PSI can be understood as a mediated form of social interaction, but one that is missing mutuality. Real social interactions feature bidirectional communication between individuals, whereas PSI is one-sided and not dialectic, because the media character controls the PSI, which makes reciprocal development of the relationship impossible (Schramm, 2008). The concept of PSI was later extended to PSR, which represent a more long-term response to media characters. Whereas PSI is limited to the interpersonal interaction between a media character and a media user, and can therefore only take place during media reception, PSR may exceed this limitation and lead to cross-situational relationships between a media user and a media character. Hence, unlike PSI, PSR can endure beyond a single exposure and develop into a long-term relationship between two individuals, beyond their face-to-face interaction (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). Another similarity between parasocial and social relationships is that both types start with a first interaction followed by an initial relationship. This relationship influences the subsequent second interaction, which influences in turn the further development of the relationship and so forth (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). Furthermore, the psychological pro-cesses in parasocial and social relationships are often similar (e.g., Cohen, 2004). Nevertheless, there are some clear differences between parasocial and social relationships. Social relationships are often accompanied by strong feelings of obligation, effort, or responsibility, whereas such feelings do not apply to PSR because the media user can terminate the relationship whenever he or she wants to. Finally, in a PSR, the media user has the potential to choose from a massive sample of media characters. This one-sided selection process is unusual in real-life relationships. Therefore, unless a media character and media user communicate one-to-one, their relationship will normally remain parasocial (Giles, 2002).

To date, PSR has been investigated predominantly in the context of amicable PSR. Regardless of the research foci and the reference media frame, the majority of studies have investigated PSR with favorite media characters, such as TV newscasters (e.g., Levy, 1979), comedians (e.g., Turner, 1993), athletes (e.g., Hartmann, Stuke, & Daschmann, 2008), and TV stars in general (e.g., Madison, Porter, & Greule, 2016). The resulting PSR were thus interpreted as amicable relationships resembling social relationships with friends. Nevertheless, real social relationships potentially involve more facets than just amicable ones. Reflecting this reality, Tukachinsky (2010) subdivided PSR into para-friendship and para-love. Whereas para-friendship includes feelings such as com-mitment to and support for a PSR, para-love is marked by more romantic feelings, including physical and emotional attraction. Although here we use the same distinction, we use the terms differently to Tukachinsky (2010), with PSR denoting para-friendship and parasocial romance (PSROM) denoting para-love. We decided not to adopt the labels introduced by Tukachinsky (2010) because "para-love" does not perfectly fit the idea of the parasocial phenomenon we investigated. The idea of PSROM refers to having a crush on a media character, including feeling emotionally and/or physically attracted to and having passionate thoughts about him or her, whereas the term "love" represents a longer-term relationship and deep affection, which may occur, but not necessarily, in the context of a parasocial phenomenon. Hence, we—along with several other authors (e.g., Aubrey, Click, & Behm-Morawitz, 2016;