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Development of Parasocial Interaction Relationships

Rebecca B. Rubin and Michael P. McHugh

The parasocial interaction relationship development process was explored by applying principles of uncertainty reduction theory. Results suggested that parasocial relationship development follows a path from (a) social and task attraction to (b) parasocial interaction to (c) a sense of relationship importance. Length of exposure to the television character was not related to parasocial interaction in the path model. The study affirmed the contribution of interpersonal communication theories to understanding relationships people have with television personalities. Implications for future research were explored.

Television networks and producers actively seek attractive television personalities so that audiences will continue to view programs week after week. They hope that audiences will form relationships with the characters, and audiences do. Uses and gratifications research has indicated that some viewers exhibit great amounts of affinity with the medium and with the characters they watch (Rubin, 1981, 1983, 1984). These relationships resemble interpersonal relationships in many ways. For example, in interpersonal relationships, uncertainty about others is reduced over time, allowing for increased attraction (Berscheid & Walster, 1978) and relationship growth (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). This investigation explored the possibility of a parallel pattern of relationship development with media characters, applying principles from both uses and gratifications and uncertainty reduction theories to understand further the development of parasocial interaction relationships.

Both uses and gratifications and uncertainty reduction theories have emerged as viable frameworks for examining the interface of interpersonal and mass communication (Perse & Rubin, 1987; Rubin & Rubin, 1985). Uses

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and gratifications is founded on three basic tenets: (a) people are goal directed in their behavior, (b) they are active media users, and (c) they are aware of their needs and select media to gratify these needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) also conceives of individuals as agents who use active, interactive, or passive strategies to reduce uncertainty (Berger, 1979). Conceptually, these two theories are consistent in their views of active, goal-oriented people. In effect, uncertainty reduction theory proposes that communication strategies are used to achieve the goal of relationship development.

The media uses and gratifications approach is related intimately to interpersonal relationship development in Horton and Wohl's (1956) concept of parasocial interaction. Parasocial interaction is a type of intimate, friend-like relationship that occurs between a mediated persona and a viewer. The goal of the present investigation was to explore Berger and Calabrese's (1975) notions about interpersonal relationship development in the development of parasocial relationships with television personalities. In effect, the proposed model depicts the antecedents and consequences of parasocial interaction.

Parasocial Interaction

Parasocial interaction is a one-sided interpersonal relationship that television viewers establish with media characters. As Horton and Wohl (1956) argued, a bond of intimacy is developed with media personalities through shared experiences existing only through viewing of the personality or persona over time. As time goes on, predictability about the character is increased. The character is reliable. The fan is loyal. As Horton and Wohl explained: "They 'know' such a persona in somewhat the same way they know their chosen friends: through direct observation and interpretation of his appearance, his gestures and voice, his conversation and conduct in a variety of situations" (p. 216).

Horton and Wohl (1956) suggested that merely watching a television program constitutes spectator acceptance of the parasocial role. After the program ends, the viewer will analyze the role in order to accept, reject, or further interpret the proposition of parasocial interaction with the persona. According to these writers, if the viewer accepts the relationship, he or she will most likely watch the program again, and if the viewing continues, a parasocial relationship becomes ongoing. Viewers may continue to engage in parasocial relationships when the set is turned off, just as people continue in interpersonal relationships when the other is not present (Caughey, 1984).

Parasocial interaction might be a functional alternative to interpersonal relationships for some people (Rubin & Rubin, 1985). Although little research has been done in this area, the relationship between interpersonal

needs and parasocial interaction for the isolated has received some attention. Gregg (1971), for example, found that socially isolated elderly viewers related parasocially to personalities on specific television programs. Miller (1983) discovered a significant relationship between parasocial use, amount of television viewed, and importance of television in the lives of older persons. Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) found a relationship between parasocial interaction and reliance on television in general when people are lonely, although a relationship did not hold up when looking only at the association between parasocial interaction with newscasters and loneliness.

Newscasters were one type of television personality that Horton and Wohl (1956) had in mind when they first conceptualized parasocial interaction. Later, Levy (1979) found that parasocial interaction was related significantly to television news viewing. People who watched more television news engaged in more parasocial interaction with news personalities. Viewers who found parasocial interaction gratifying, increased their exposure to television news for more contact with the news personalities. Houlberg (1984) discovered that parasocial interaction was a construct different from the audience's perceptions of a newscaster's professional and physical attributes. And, Rubin et al. (1985) found sizable relationships between parasocial interaction and both news affinity and perceived news realism. These authors suggested that parasocial interaction, as a form of intimacy, might be seen as an antecedent to future media use. They also proposed that interpersonal relationship development theories be used to study the development of these relationships.

Relationship Development Theories

Theories explaining the development of interpersonal relationships view communication as central to the process (Altman & Taylor, 1973). The more interaction that occurs, the more likely it is that the relationship will develop. Berger and Calabrese (1975) built on this proposition and conceived of relationship development as a process of increased certainty. Amount of communication leads to increased liking of the other; communication intimacy results from both amount of communication and liking (see Figure 1). Applied to and operationalized for mediated communication, this principle reads: Amount of television exposure (communication) leads to increased attraction to (liking of) a media character; parasocial interaction results from both exposure and attraction. In interpersonal and mediated contexts, this process is thought to result in increased relationship importance.

Communication, liking, and intimacy, therefore, are the major components of the uncertainty reduction process. Berger and Calabrese (1975), in fact, predicted relationships between uncertainty reduction and amount of communication (Axiom 1), liking (Axiom 7), and intimacy (Axiom 4). Uncer-

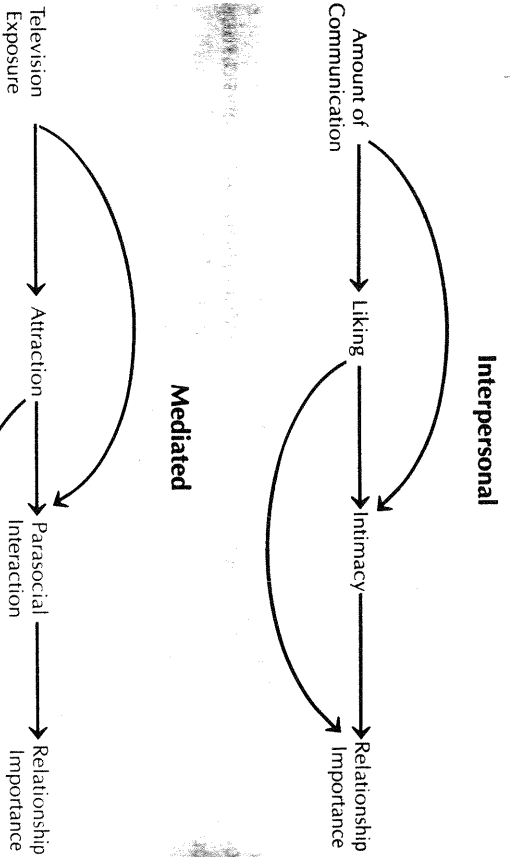


Figure 1. A model of interpersonal and mediated relationship development.

tainty reduction, then, can be viewed as a mediator of the relationship development process in a broader sense (Berger, 1986). Because uncertainty reduction is intricately woven into and underscores the connections identified in this model, it is not easily measured.

This relationship development process can be better explained via examination of the component elements of the model. First, Berger and Calabrese's (1975) second theorem posited a positive relationship between amount of communication and intimacy. This theorem was based on Lalljee and Cook's (1973) findings that the number of words and communication intimacy both increase over time. Research in both interpersonal and mass communication supports this notion. Clatterbuck (1979) found that the amount of time people know others is related positively to attributional confidence in the interpersonal relationship development process. Whetmore and Kiehlwasser (1983) proposed that soap opera exposure over time leads to increased understanding of the characters and programs. In light of these and other findings (e.g., Levy, 1979), the first hypothesis was a test in a mediated context of Berger and Calabrese's second theorem:

H1: Television exposure will be related positively to parasocial interaction with the televised character.

Second, Berger and Calabrese's (1975) fifth theorem linked amount of communication to interpersonal attraction (i.e., liking). Berscheid and Walster (1978) defined interpersonal attraction (or hostility) as "an individ-

ual's tendency or predisposition to evaluate another person or the symbol of the person in a positive (or negative) way" (pp. 3-4). Newcomb (1956) postulated that attraction results from engaging in rewarding interaction, attitudinal similarity, and reciprocated attraction. As Horton and Wohl (1956) would have predicted, if television personalities, through their communication, show that they are attracted to and engage in rewarding interactions with the audience, audience members will become more attracted to the personalities and engage in parasocial interaction with them. The second hypothesis postulated that Berger and Calabrese's predicted relationship between amount of communication and liking also will hold in mediated contexts:

H2: Television exposure will be related positively to degree of attraction towards the televised character.

This link between exposure and attraction is well supported in the research literature (see e.g., Romer & Berkson, 1980; Tyler & Sears, 1977). Individuals also are viewed as socially attractive when they hold similar attitudes (Byrne, 1961; Byrne, Baskett, & Hodges, 1971; Byrne & Clore, 1966; Gonzales, Davis, Loney, Lukens, & Junghans, 1983; Sunnafrank, 1983). Individuals with similar attitudes communicate more often with each other (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970) and are more accepted by others (Erwin, 1982). Because it is through communication that disclosure of attitudes occurs, it is likely that amount of interaction will be related positively to social attraction.

In addition to social attraction, physical attraction and task attraction also are mentioned in the literature (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). Research has shown consistently that those who are considered to be physically attractive also are identified as more socially attractive (Byrne, London, & Reeves, 1966; Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Goldman & Lewis, 1977; Miller, 1970; Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottmann, 1966). Task attraction was related to the camera angle used during television newscasts (McCain, Chilberg, & Wakshlag, 1977) and to both credibility and social attraction (Powell, Hickson, & Hill, 1977). Thus, social, physical, and task attraction can be seen as intricately related to not only amount of exposure to the television character, but also to parasocial interaction.

As defined above, parasocial interaction is a form of intimacy viewers establish with media personae. Berger and Calabrese's (1975) 14th theorem identifies a link between liking (i.e., attraction) and intimacy (i.e., parasocial interaction). So, there is reason to suspect that seeing television performers as attractive would be related to increased levels of communication intimacy, even though that intimacy may be one-sided:

H3: Social, physical, and task attraction will be related positively to parasocial interaction.

As we have argued, increased communication with televised characters (i.e., television exposure) leads to both liking (i.e., attraction) and intimacy (i.e., parasocial interaction) in mediated relationships. The last stage of this model is concerned with the consequences of intimate communication, a perception that the relationship is important.

In the mass communication literature, Rubin et al. (1985) found a strong connection between parasocial interaction and television news affinity. These authors argued that parasocial interaction may be related to a process of bonding with the media persona. In the interpersonal communication literature, the link between intimacy and relationship importance often is conceptualized in cost/reward terms. For instance, uncertainty reduction theory posits that uncertainty is reduced in relationships when the other is seen as a source of reward (Berger, 1979; Berger & Bradac, 1982). Social penetration theory is based on the premise that positive, intimate interactions produce further rewards in the relationship (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) social exchange theory addresses the issue of relationship outcomes even more directly. These writers argued that relationship satisfaction can be predicted from knowledge of rewards in a relationship (attraction) and expectations about future rewards. People view relationships that are expected to continue as more important because of the anticipated rewards. More intimate communication, then, is related positively to relationship importance. This line of reasoning led to the final two hypotheses:

H4: Social, physical, and task attraction will be related positively to the perceived importance of a relationship with a televised character.

H5: Parasocial interaction will be related positively to the perceived importance of a relationship with a televised character.

This last hypothesis completes the path model identified earlier in Figure 1. In this model, three of Berger and Calabrese's (1975) theorems are tested in a mediated context. In addition, parasocial interaction is viewed as an antecedent to the establishment of relationship importance with a television character.

Method

Sample and Procedures

Questionnaires were completed by 303 students in undergraduate communication courses at a large midwestern university. Students' ages ranged from 18 to 35, with the mean age being 21.29 years. The sample consisted of 143 males and 158 females (one subject failed to indicate gender). Data were collected the last week of April 1985.

The questionnaire consisted of a 20-item parasocial interaction scale, a 6-item perceived importance scale, a 15-item interpersonal attraction scale, and a question tapping the length of time subjects had viewed their favorite television performer. The questionnaires were constructed so that the scales were ordered randomly.

Instruments

Parasocial interaction was measured by adapting the Parasocial Interaction Scale (PSI) developed by Rubin et al. (1985) for newscasters to "favorite television performer." Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement, according to five response options ranging from "strongly agree" (5) to "strongly disagree" (1), with items such as "I feel sorry for my favorite television performer when he or she makes a mistake," "My favorite television performer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend," and "I sometimes make remarks to my favorite television performer during the program." The development of the PSI followed from Horton and Wohl's (1956) concept of parasocial interaction and subsequent research (Gregg, 1971; Levy, 1979; Miller, 1983). Rubin et al. (1985) found the PSI to be internally consistent (Cronbach alpha = .92). The Cronbach alpha in this study was .88. The mean response to the 20-item scale was used as the measure of parasocial interaction. PSI scores ranged from 1.15 to 4.85 ($M = 3.31$, $SD = .55$).

The 15-item scale developed by McCroskey and McCain (1974) was used to measure social, physical, and task attraction. Scale responses ranged from "strongly agree" (5) to "strongly disagree" (1) to social attraction items such as "I think he (she) could be a friend of mine," physical attraction items such as "I find him (her) very attractive physically," and task attraction items such as "I have confidence in his (her) ability to get the job done." Each of the three subscales, containing five items each, had originally demonstrated adequate reliability coefficients (.84, .86, and .81, respectively). In the present study, the Cronbach alpha was .66 for the social attraction subscale, .89 for the physical attraction subscale, and .61 for the task attraction subscale. Scores on the five items for each subscale were averaged: social attraction ($M = 3.83$, $SD = .63$); physical attraction ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .91$); and task attraction ($M = 3.69$, $SD = .65$).

Importance of developing a relationship with one's favorite television performer was measured using: (a) three affinity items adapted from earlier (Rubin, 1983; Rubin et al., 1985) research ("When it's on, I would rather watch my favorite television performer's program than do anything else," "Whenever I'm unable to watch my favorite television performer's program, I really miss it," and "Watching my favorite television performer's program is one of the more important things I do each day or each week"); (b) one item used by Levy and Windahl (1984) to measure preactivity and

shown (Rubin & Perse, 1987) to be related significantly to affinity ("I usually plan my evenings so that I don't miss my favorite television performer's program"); and (c) two items that tapped a functional alternative notion of affinity ("I would rather watch my favorite television performer than visit with friends" and "I would rather watch my favorite television performer than attend a social activity.") A principal axis factor analysis of the 6 items resulted in a one-factor solution, accounting for 67.0% of the variance. The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .90. The mean score ($M = 2.23$, $SD = .88$) on these six items was used as a measure of perceived importance of relationship development with the performer.

Lastly, as an index of television exposure, respondents indicated the length of time they had spent viewing their favorite television performer.² Six response categories ranged from "less than 1 year" (1) to "more than 5 years" (6). The mean for this single-item measure was 3.32 ($SD = 1.96$).³

Results

The first two hypotheses focused on the relationships between television exposure and (a) parasocial interaction and (b) attraction. There was a low significant Pearson correlation between length of viewing and parasocial interaction ($r = .12$, $p < .05$). However, none of the three attraction indexes was related significantly to length of viewing (see Table 1).

The third hypothesis predicted a significant relationship between attraction and parasocial interaction. As the data in Table 1 show, parasocial

Table 1
Pearson Correlation Matrix

	Television Exposure	Parasocial Interaction	Relationship Importance	Social Attraction	Physical Attraction
Parasocial Interaction	.12*				
Relationship Importance	.05	.52***			
Social Attraction	.01	.35***	.03		
Physical Attraction	.05	.16**	.11*	.11*	
Task Attraction	.05	.33***	.09	.35***	.26***
M	3.32	3.31	2.23	3.83	3.42
SD	1.96	0.55	0.88	0.63	0.91

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

interaction correlated significantly with social ($r = .35$, $p < .001$), physical ($r = .16$, $p < .01$), and task ($r = .33$, $p < .001$) attraction. However, the fourth hypothesis, that attraction would be related significantly to perceived relationship development importance, was not supported. Relationship development importance did not correlate significantly with social ($r = .03$) or task ($r = .09$) attraction, and related only slightly to physical attraction ($r = .11$, $p < .05$).

The fifth hypothesis predicted a positive significant relationship between perceived relationship development importance and parasocial interaction. The correlation between these two variables was significant ($r = .52$, $p < .001$), supporting the fifth hypothesis.

The univariate relationships uncovered through these analyses were further tested via a path model of parasocial relationship development. Path analysis allows for greater theoretical significance because the model developed is necessarily recursive and allows for measurement of both direct and indirect effects of one variable on another (Asher, 1976). Also, simple and compound paths can be distinguished.

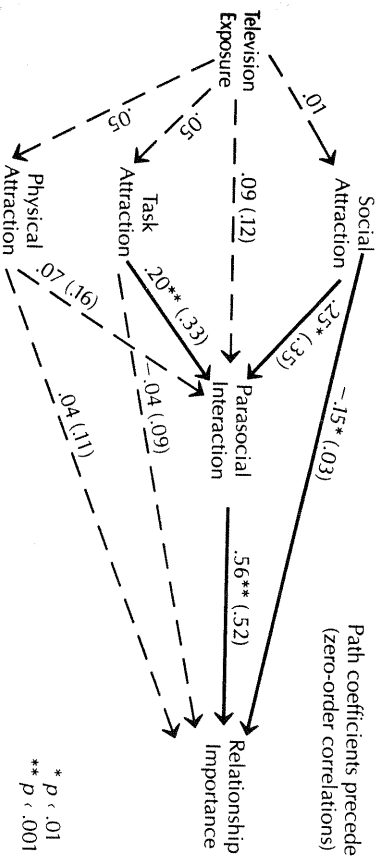


Figure 2. Path analysis of mediated attraction.

Figure 2 presents the results of the multiple regression analyses (with means substituted for missing data) to test the path model of parasocial relationship development. To determine if a compound path existed, relationship importance was regressed onto: television exposure; social, physical, and task attraction; and parasocial interaction. Standardized beta weights (path coefficients), significant at or beyond the .05 level (using the F -ratio statistic) indicate a complex path from social and task attraction to parasocial interaction, and from parasocial interaction to relationship development. Physical attraction and television exposure were not integral in the parasocial relationship development process. Social and task attrac-

tion, not significantly correlated with relationship importance by themselves, appeared to be mediated by parasocial interaction.

Discussion

As Horton and Wohl (1956) hypothesized, parasocial interaction is similar to the establishment of social relationship with others. In this investigation, parasocial interaction was related strongly to social and task attraction towards the media personality, and to importance of relationship development with the personality. This supports previous contentions that media relationships can be seen as functional alternatives to interpersonal relationships (Rosengren & Windahl, 1972; Rubin & Rubin, 1985). Interpersonal and mediated relationships appear to follow a similar process of development.

The results of this study also confirm the importance of social attraction in the development of parasocial interaction relationships. Blau (1964) suggested that relationships develop as a function of individuals presenting themselves as attractive to others. Newcomb's (1956) reinforcement theory explained that attraction often results from experiencing rewarding interaction with others. When television personalities are socially attractive and create the context for interaction, rewarding relationships develop. In this study, the similar associations between both social and task attraction and parasocial interaction support these perspectives. It also is interesting that the product-moment correlations between physical attraction and both parasocial interaction and relationship importance diminished significantly in size when entered into the path model. This would suggest that viewers are more interested in television personalities who are attractive as social or work partners than in the physically attractive. It is important to note that the coefficient alphas for the social and task attraction scales were modest, indicating that the translation of the scales from a personal to a mediated context may not have been completely successful.

However, the findings of this study contrast with propositions (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) and findings (Romer & Berkson, 1980) in the interpersonal attraction literature that attraction should result from greater levels of exposure to a person. Because the Romer and Berkson study was conducted in a confined environment (a mental hospital) with a different population, conclusions about the role of exposure and interpersonal attraction remain tentative. As Berscheid and Walster (1978) and Sunnafrank (1986) pointed out, length of exposure (resulting from proximity) could result in either increased or decreased attraction, depending on the information learned about the other individual. Positive information results in increased attraction and negative information results in reduced attraction. In this study, respondents chose their favorite television character, indicating that

only positive information was used and so the attraction scores were homogeneously positive.

In addition, no clear connection between exposure and attraction was found even though the personalities targeted in this study had been viewed by respondents for over 3 years, on the average. Three possible explanations exist for these findings. First, these respondents obviously had passed through first impression stages of interaction that typify previous attraction research studies. Impressions formed over a long period of time are less likely to change. Second, the measure of television exposure used here may have been inadequate. It is possible that respondents may have actually "known" the personalities for longer periods of time than their current show had been on the air (e.g., Bill Cosby). In addition, the measure did not account for the number of times a character was viewed each week or year. Third, amount of communication may not figure into parasocial relationships because the mediated context may be controlled, ritualized, and predictable. As Sunnafrank (1986) explained, "In ritualized communicative encounters . . . behavior may be highly predictable due to situation-relevant norms and rules" (p. 5). Producers reduce uncertainty early in the season so that viewers will feel more comfortable with the characters.

The path model tested in this investigation demonstrated that parasocial interaction is an important part of mediated relationship development. Attraction results in parasocial interaction, and perceived relationship development importance is mediated by parasocial interaction. Parasocial interaction is essential to the process. And, television exposure, although related to importance in a simple manner, is not influential in either parasocial interaction or attraction to the character. Thus, relationship development with a media persona is not a matter of sheer exposure duration, but a function of attraction that leads to parasocial interaction.

Berger and Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory is a well articulated theory in interpersonal communication that links motives to behaviors and relationship development (Sunnafrank, 1986). It appears that some of the principles also hold in media relationships. Future research should examine additional axioms and theorems in the mediated context, particularly those that directly concern the role of uncertainty reduction (see e.g., Perse & Rubin, 1987). For instance, the findings discussed here suggest that reciprocity is not essential in mediated relationships. Conversely, one would expect that information seeking and nonverbal affiliative expressiveness principles are valid in mediated relationships as well as in interpersonal ones. Accordingly, the uses and gratifications perspective could be used to study interpersonal relationship development (Rubin & Rubin, 1985).

Lastly, this study provides validity information on the measures used. First, discriminant validity is shown for the relationship importance measure; results indicated that relationship importance is a construct that dif-

fers from attraction. Second, the investigation provides concurrent validity for the Parasocial Interaction Scale (Rubin et al., 1985). PSI scores, based in part on perceptions of attraction, were related to the measures of social and task attraction used in this study. The PSI taps some of the concepts it was constructed to measure, but not physical attraction. Yet, PSI scores also were related to the relationship importance measure. The Parasocial Interaction Scale, then, emerges as a more comprehensive instrument in that it taps both perceived importance and attraction to television characters.

Notes

¹Because the nature of the parasocial relationship was more important than the type of program viewed, respondents were allowed to choose their favorite television performer instead of a particular television newscaster (Rubin et al., 1985) or soap opera character (Perse & Rubin, 1987). This aided control of parasocial interaction measurement error by insuring that respondents were familiar with a character (Kerlinger, 1986). It also allowed a greater range of responses for the relationship importance measure.

²Analysis revealed a total of 89 favorite performers. News personalities ($n = 7$) such as Dan Rather and Diane Sawyer had been viewed for as long ($M = 3.00$) as had (a) music/variety performers such as David Letterman, Carol Burnett, and Johnny Carson ($n = 61$, $M = 3.09$), (b) action/adventure performers such as Don Johnson, Tom Selleck, and William Shatner ($n = 24$, $M = 3.16$), and (c) situation comedy performers such as Bill Cosby, Alan Alda, and Shelley Long ($n = 125$, $M = 3.02$). The means across these genres were consistent. Bill Cosby received the most mentions ($n = 53$), followed by David Letterman ($n = 46$), Alan Alda ($n = 20$), Michael L. Fox ($n = 10$), and Johnny Carson ($n = 10$).

³Amount of daily television exposure also was measured via Rubin's (1983) procedures. Correlations were modest between amount of television exposure and other variables in this study (e.g., television exposure duration, $r = .03$; parasocial interaction, $r = .03$). Only perceived importance ($r = .16$, $p < .01$) and physical attraction ($r = -.11$, $p < .05$) were related significantly to amount of exposure. Path analysis using this index instead of television exposure duration demonstrated the superiority of the duration scale. All analyses involving television exposure in this study refer to the duration scale.

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