



Parasocial Attachment to Celebrities as a Predictor of Normalisation and Intentions towards Risky behavior among Young Adults

¹**Bhoomika Pathak**, *Department of Psychology Dr. Harisingh Gour Vishwavidyalaya (a Central University), Sagar, Madhya Pradesh*

²**Akash Gupta**, *Department of Psychology Dr. Harisingh Gour Vishwavidyalaya (a Central University), Sagar, Madhya Pradesh*

Abstract: Celebrities and social media influencers play a powerful role in shaping how young adults think and behave. Parasocial relationships being the main cause of it leaving an impact on their attitudes and behaviors. This study explored whether the emotional attachment young people form with celebrities known as parasocial attachment can predict how much they view risky behaviors as “normal” and whether they intend to engage in them. A survey was carried out with 50 young adults between the ages of 18 and 25. Participants answered a structured questionnaire measuring their level of attachment to celebrities, their views on risky behaviors such as drinking, smoking, or aggression, and their intentions to engage in such behaviors. The results showed that stronger parasocial attachment was linked with greater acceptance of risky behaviors and a higher likelihood of intending to try them. Further analysis suggested that this effect partly worked through perceived norms: the more participants felt celebrities and peers accepted these behaviors, the more normal and acceptable they seem. These findings suggest that celebrities have a subtle but significant influence on health-related choices among youth. Strengthening media literacy and critical thinking skills may help young people resist unhealthy forms of conformity and make safer decisions.

Keywords: *Parasocial Attachment, Risky Behaviors, Celebrity Influence, Perceived Norms, Young Adults*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The rapid evolution of media and technology has significantly transformed the way individuals interact with public figures. Traditionally, celebrities were distant figures whose lives were accessible only through television, films, or print media. However, the emergence of social media platforms has blurred these boundaries, enabling continuous exposure and perceived interaction. This shift has led to the development of parasocial relationships, defined as one-sided emotional connections individuals form with media figures who are unaware of their existence (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Parasocial attachment goes beyond simple admiration; it involves feelings of intimacy, friendship, and emotional investment. Individuals may feel that they “know” the celebrity personally, despite the lack of real interaction. Such attachments are strengthened through repeated exposure, relatability, and perceived authenticity of the celebrity or influencer.

Young adults, particularly those aged 18–25, are especially vulnerable to forming parasocial bonds. This developmental stage is characterized by identity exploration, social comparison, and susceptibility to external influences. As a result, celebrities and influencers often become role models whose behaviors, values, and lifestyles are internalized.

1.2 Current Trends

In recent years, social media influencers have become dominant figures shaping public opinion and behavior. Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers actively engage with their audiences through comments, live sessions, and personal updates. This creates an illusion of reciprocity, making the relationship feel more genuine and interactive.

A growing body of research suggests that exposure to celebrity lifestyles can influence health behaviors and risk-taking tendencies. For instance, portrayals of alcohol consumption, smoking, or reckless activities in media have been linked to increased acceptance and imitation among young audiences. The normalization of such behaviors occurs gradually through repeated exposure, making them appear socially acceptable.

Moreover, trends such as viral challenges, party culture, and “aesthetic lifestyles” often glamorize risky behaviors. When these behaviors are endorsed or displayed by admired figures, they gain legitimacy in the eyes of followers.

1.3 Research Gaps

Although parasocial relationships have been widely studied in media psychology, most existing studies have focused on emotional attachment, entertainment experiences, celebrity worship, and identity development. Research examining the behavioral implications of

parasocial attachment remains relatively limited. Previous studies primarily emphasized direct media exposure and celebrity endorsement effects, rather than the psychological bond individuals form with celebrities.

Furthermore, earlier research has largely focused on traditional media forms such as television and cinema, with comparatively less attention given to the influence of social media influencers and digital celebrities. In the current digital era, celebrities are no longer distant public figures; instead, social media platforms create a sense of accessibility and intimacy that intensifies parasocial attachment. Despite this shift, there remains insufficient research examining how these emotionally charged relationships contribute to the normalization of risky behaviors among young adults.

Another significant gap in literature is the lack of focus on the mediating role of perceived normalization. Existing studies have explored imitation and celebrity influence but have not adequately investigated how parasocial attachment shapes individuals' perceptions regarding what behaviors are socially acceptable or common. Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by examining not only the relationship between parasocial attachment and risky behavior intentions but also the role of perceived normalization in this process.

By integrating parasocial attachment, normalization, and risk propensity within one framework, the study contributes a more comprehensive understanding of how celebrity influence operates psychologically in the social media era.

2. Methodology

2.1 Aim

The aim of the present study is to examine whether parasocial attachment to celebrities influences the normalization of risky behavior and intentions toward engaging in risky behavior among young adults.

2.2 Objective

- To assess the level of parasocial attachment toward celebrities among young adults.
- To examine the extent to which risky behaviors are perceived as normalized among young adults.
- To explore the relationship between parasocial attachment, perceived normalization of risky behavior, and general risk propensity among young adults.
- To determine whether parasocial attachment significantly predicts risky behavior intentions among young adults.

2.3 Hypothesis

H1: There will be a significant positive relationship between parasocial attachment to celebrities and the perceived normalization of risky behavior among young adults.

H2: Higher levels of parasocial attachment to celebrities will be associated with greater intentions toward engaging in risky behavior among young adults.

H3: Perceived normalization of risky behavior will be positively associated with general risk propensity among young adults.

H4: Parasocial attachment to celebrities will significantly predict risky behavior intentions among young adults.

2.4 Research Design

A quantitative correlational research design was employed to examine relationships among parasocial attachment, perceived normalization, and risky behavior intentions.

2.5 Sample

The sample consisted of 122 young adults (Male = 64, Female = 58) aged between 18 and 25 years.

Inclusion Criteria

- Age between 18–25 years
- Active social media users
- Familiar with at least one celebrity/influencer

Exclusion Criteria

- Participants outside the age range
- Incomplete responses
- Lack of social media exposure
- Don't following any celebrity/influencer

Participants were drawn from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, primarily middle-class, with varying levels of education and digital exposure.

2.6 Data Collection

Tools

- Parasocial Attachment Scale=originally proposed by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl (1956). A widely used operational measure was later developed by Alan M. Rubin et al. (1985), known as the Parasocial Interaction (PSI) Scale.
- Perceived Normalization of Risky Behavior Scale=developed by H. Wesley Perkins and Alan D. Berkowitz (1980s–2000s).
- General Risk Propensity Scale=by Elke U. Weber et al. (2002).

2.6 Procedure

Data was collected using Google Forms. Participants were provided with informed consent and assured confidentiality. The survey included demographic details followed by standardized questionnaires.

2.7 Analysis Techniques

- Descriptive Statistics (Mean, SD)
- Pearson Correlation
- Linear Regression

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Version 26.

3. Results

Participants had a mean age of 21.46 years (SD = 1.82). Parasocial attachment levels were moderately high (M = 71.89), while general risk propensity was moderate (M = 25.84).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
Age	18.00	25.00	21.46	1.82
Parasocial Attachment	42.00	99.00	71.89	12.17
Perceived Norms and Acceptability of Risky Behavior	20.00	46.00	31.07	5.97
General Risk Propensity	16.00	36.00	25.84	4.26

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

Significant positive correlations were observed:

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix Among Parasocial Attachment, Perceived Norms and Acceptability of Risky Behavior, and General Risk Propensity

Variables	Parasocial Attachment	Perceived Norms and Acceptability of Risky Behavior	General Risk Propensity
Parasocial Attachment	——	0.77**	0.72**
Perceived Norms and Acceptability of Risky Behavior	0.77**	——	0.73**
General Risk Propensity	0.72**	0.73**	——

Note. ** $p < .001$. $N = 122$.

Parasocial Attachment $\leftrightarrow$ Risk Propensity ($r = .72$)

Parasocial Attachment ↔ Normalization ($r = .77$)

Normalization ↔ Risk Propensity ($r = .73^{**}$)

→ Strong positive associations among all variables

This means that as individuals' emotional attachment to media figures increases, their acceptance of risky behaviors and likelihood to take risks also increase.

Similarly, perceived norms and acceptance of risky behavior strongly correlate with risk propensity ($r = .73^{**}$), suggesting that social perceptions influence personal risk-taking tendencies. H3 was supported: perceived normalization was significantly and positively associated with general risk propensity ($r = .73^{**}$, $p < .001$).

These findings indicate that higher parasocial attachment is associated with increased acceptance and likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors. H1 was supported: a significant positive relationship was found between parasocial attachment and perceived normalization of risky behavior ($r = .77^{**}$, $p < .001$). H2 was also supported: higher parasocial attachment was significantly associated with greater risk-taking intentions ($r = .72^{**}$, $p < .001$).

Regression results showed:

Table 3: *Regression Analysis Showing Parasocial Attachment as a Predictor of the Dependent Variable*

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	P
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	7.766	1.618		4.80	<.001
Parasocial Attachment	0.251	0.022	.719	11.41	<.001

The unstandardized coefficient ($B = .251$) indicates that for every one-unit increase in Parasocial Attachment, General Risk Propensity increases by 0.251 units, holding other factors constant.

The standardized Beta ($\beta = .719$) shows a strong positive relationship — parasocial attachment explains a substantial proportion of variance in risk propensity.

The t-value (11.326) is highly significant ($p < .001$), meaning this relationship is statistically reliable and unlikely due to chance.

Overall, young adults with stronger parasocial relationships (emotional bonds with media figures or influencers) tend to show higher acceptance of risky behaviors and a greater tendency to take risks themselves.

The correlation and regression results together suggest that parasocial attachment significantly predicts general risk propensity, explaining a large proportion of its variance.

This implies that media exposure and emotional connection to public figures can indirectly influence individuals' behavioral choices, especially risk-taking tendencies.

This confirms that parasocial attachment is a strong predictor of risk propensity. The model accounted for a substantial proportion of variance in General Risk Propensity ($R^2 = .517$), indicating that parasocial attachment alone explains approximately 51.7% of the variability in risk propensity scores. H4 was supported: parasocial attachment significantly predicted risky behavior intentions ($\beta = .719$, $t = 11.326$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .517$).

4. Discussion

The present study examined the role of parasocial attachment to celebrities as a predictor of normalization and intentions toward risky behavior among young adults. The findings collectively highlight the psychological influence of media figures in shaping young adults' perceptions and behavioral tendencies, with all five study objectives yielding clear and consistent results.

The first objective aimed to assess the level of parasocial attachment among young adults. The results revealed a moderately high mean score ($M = 71.89$, $SD = 12.17$), indicating that participants experienced considerable emotional closeness with celebrities and influencers. This reflects the role of social media platforms in fostering perceived intimacy through continuous, informal engagement that strengthens parasocial bonds beyond what traditional media afforded.

With regard to the second objective, the findings indicated a moderate level of perceived normalization ($M = 31.07$, $SD = 5.97$), suggesting that participants viewed risky behaviors such as substance use and reckless decision-making as somewhat common and acceptable. Repeated exposure to celebrity-endorsed lifestyles, amplified by social media algorithms, likely contributes to this gradual normalization.

The third objective investigated the influence of parasocial attachment on risky behavior intentions. A significant positive correlation was found between parasocial attachment and general risk propensity ($r = .72^{**}$, $p < .001$), indicating that stronger emotional bonds with media figures are associated with greater behavioral inclination toward risk-taking. Parasocial attachment thus functions as a key psychological mechanism through which celebrity influence shapes real-world intentions.

Concerning the fourth objective, correlation analysis revealed strong positive associations among all three variables: parasocial attachment with perceived normalization ($r = .77^{**}$, $p < .001$), parasocial attachment with risk propensity ($r = .72^{**}$, $p < .001$), and perceived normalization with risk propensity ($r = .73^{**}$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that the three constructs operate in a mutually reinforcing manner, whereby increasing parasocial attachment elevates perceptions of social acceptability, which in turn heightens risk-taking tendencies.

The fifth objective examined whether parasocial attachment significantly predicts risky behavior intentions. Linear regression confirmed parasocial attachment as a significant predictor of general risk propensity ($\beta = .719$, $t = 11.326$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .517$), explaining approximately 51.7% of the variance. This underscores the importance of examining the psychological depth of celebrity influence rather than exposure alone.

One of the major contributions of the study is its emphasis on the psychological mechanism underlying celebrity influence. While earlier research has primarily focused on media exposure and celebrity endorsement effects, the present study specifically examines parasocial attachment as an emotional and cognitive process through which media influence operates. This distinction is important because simply being exposed to celebrity content does not necessarily produce behavioral influence; rather, it is the emotional closeness and identification with celebrities that intensify the impact of their actions on followers. By focusing on attachment rather than exposure alone, the study provides a deeper understanding of how celebrity influence becomes psychologically meaningful.

The findings strongly corroborate Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), which posits that individuals learn behaviors through observing role models. Parasocial attachment strengthens this process because emotional investment in a celebrity increases attention, admiration, and internalization of their behaviors, making imitation of even risky or unhealthy actions more likely.

The results also align with Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), which proposes that repeated media exposure gradually shapes perceptions of social norms. Continuous exposure to celebrity lifestyles that glamorize risk-taking, combined with emotional attachment, may cultivate the perception that such behaviors are normal or even aspirational, making their social acceptance and eventual adoption more likely.

Additionally, the findings support Social Norms Theory, which suggests that behavior is shaped by what individuals perceive others approve of or engage in. When celebrities

function as symbolic social reference groups, their endorsement of risky behaviors signals acceptability to followers, lowering the threshold for imitation.

The study also raises concerns regarding the ethical responsibilities of celebrities and social media platforms. Since public figures significantly influence followers' perceptions, glamorizing risky lifestyles without acknowledging consequences may unintentionally encourage imitation, particularly among young adults who are in a formative stage of identity development and are especially susceptible to social influence.

Overall, the present study contributes to media psychology by demonstrating that parasocial attachment is not merely a harmless emotional experience but a psychologically influential process capable of shaping perceptions of social norms and behavioral intentions. By focusing on normalization and risky behavior within the context of modern social media culture, the study expands existing literature and offers valuable insights into the subtle yet powerful ways media figures influence young adults' attitudes and behaviors.

4.1 Implications

Theoretical Implications

The findings strengthen existing theories in media psychology by demonstrating that parasocial attachment is not merely an emotional phenomenon but also a significant behavioral predictor. The study extends Social Learning Theory by showing that imitation is strengthened when emotional attachment exists between the observer and the model. It also contributes to Cultivation Theory by illustrating how repeated media exposure combined with parasocial attachment shapes perceptions of social norms. Additionally, the findings support Social Norms Theory by showing that celebrity influence affects what individuals perceive as socially acceptable behavior.

The study further contributes to parasocial relationship literature by integrating behavioral outcomes into the framework. Earlier studies focused primarily on emotional effects such as loneliness reduction or companionship, whereas the present research demonstrates that parasocial attachment also has important implications for risk-related attitudes and behaviors.

Practical Implications

The findings highlight the growing influence of celebrities and social media influencers on young adults' behavioral choices. This suggests the need for increased awareness regarding the type of content promoted online. Educational institutions and mental health professionals can use these findings to develop media literacy programs that encourage critical thinking and responsible media consumption.

The study also emphasizes the importance of responsible influencer behavior. Since

celebrities significantly shape perceptions of social norms, promoting risky behaviors without consequences may unintentionally encourage imitation among followers. Social media platforms and policymakers may therefore consider implementing stricter guidelines regarding harmful or risky promotional content.

Social Implications

The normalization of risky behavior through celebrity influence can have broader societal consequences, including increased substance use, unsafe lifestyle choices, and unhealthy social comparison among youth. By highlighting these psychological processes, the study encourages discussions around ethical media representation and the responsibilities of influencers in shaping youth culture.

4.2 Limitations

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations.

First, the study employed a cross-sectional correlational design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships. Although parasocial attachment was found to predict risk propensity statistically, causality cannot be definitively concluded. Longitudinal or experimental research designs would provide stronger evidence regarding causal direction.

Second, the sample size was relatively small ($N = 122$) and restricted to young adults aged 18–25 years. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to adolescents, older adults, or individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

Third, the study relied entirely on self-report measures, which may be influenced by social desirability bias, response exaggeration, or inaccurate self-perception. Participants may underreport or overreport their attachment levels and risky behavior tendencies.

Fourth, the study focused primarily on parasocial attachment as a predictor variable. Other factors such as personality traits, peer influence, sensation-seeking tendencies, family environment, and psychological well-being were not included. These variables may also significantly contribute to risky behavior tendencies and should be examined in future research.

Finally, the study was conducted within a specific social and cultural context, where social media usage patterns and celebrity culture may differ from other populations. Future studies should explore cross-cultural comparisons to better understand how parasocial relationships operate in diverse contexts.

4.3 Future Directions

The present study opens several avenues for future research. First, future studies may employ longitudinal research designs to examine how parasocial attachment influences risky behavior over time and whether these effects persist across different developmental stages.

Second, future research can include larger and more diverse samples across different cultural, socioeconomic, and geographical backgrounds to improve the generalizability of findings. Comparative studies between adolescents and adults may also provide deeper insight into developmental differences in susceptibility to celebrity influence.

Third, future studies may explore additional psychological variables such as self-esteem, loneliness, sensation-seeking, peer pressure, and identity formation, which may mediate or moderate the relationship between parasocial attachment and risky behavior.

Fourth, researchers may examine differences between various types of celebrities and influencers, such as film actors, musicians, fitness influencers, gamers, or lifestyle creators, to understand whether certain categories of media figures exert stronger influence on normalization processes.

Finally, future research can investigate the effectiveness of media literacy interventions in reducing the impact of unhealthy celebrity influence and promoting critical engagement with social media content among young adults.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights that parasocial attachment to celebrities significantly influences young adults' normalization and intentions toward risky behavior. Strong emotional bonds with media figures are associated with greater acceptance and likelihood of engaging in such behaviors. The findings support Social Learning and Cultivation perspectives, emphasizing that media influence operates not only through exposure but also through psychological attachment. Overall, the study underscores the need for media awareness and responsible content consumption among young audiences.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Bandura, A. (1977). Social learning theory. Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory of mass communication. *Media Psychology*, 3(3), 265–299. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0303_03
- Berkowitz, A. D. (2004). The social norms approach: Theory, research, and annotated bibliography. Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention.

- Bond, B. J. (2018). Parasocial relationships with media personalities: Why they matter and how they differ among individuals. *Communication Research Reports*, 35(3), 230–239. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2018.1478602>
- de Bérail, P., Guillon, M., & Bungener, C. (2019). The relations between YouTubers' popularity and parasocial relationships: A parasocial perspective on YouTubers. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 93, 223–229. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.12.029>
- Giles, D. C. (2002). Parasocial interaction: A review of the literature and a model for future research. *Media Psychology*, 4(3), 279–305. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0403_04
- Giles, D. C. (2022). *Parasocial relationships: The psychology of imaginary friendships with celebrities*. Routledge.
- Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (1986). Living with television: The dynamics of the cultivation process. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Perspectives on media effects* (pp. 17–40). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gerbner, G., & Gross, L. (1976). Living with television: The violence profile. *Journal of Communication*, 26(2), 172–199. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1976.tb01397>
- Gleason, T. R., Theran, S. A., & Newberg, E. M. (2017). Parasocial interactions and relationships in early adolescence. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 255. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00255>
- Hoffner, C., & Buchanan, M. (2005). Young adults' wishful identification with television characters: The role of perceived similarity and character attributes. *Media Psychology*, 7(4), 325–351. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0704_2
- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049>
- Konijn, E. A., & Hoorn, J. F. (2005). Some like it bad: Testing a model for perceiving and experiencing fictional characters. *Media Psychology*, 7(2), 107–144. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0702_1
- Moyer-Gusé, E., & Nabi, R. L. (2010). Explaining the effects of narrative in entertainment television. *Human Communication Research*, 36(1), 26–52. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2009.01367>

- Perkins, H. W. (2003). The social norms approach to preventing school and college age substance abuse. Jossey-Bass.
- Rousseau, A., & Eggermont, S. (2018). The relationship between celebrity worship and risky behaviors: The mediating role of perceived norms. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 128, 123–128. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2018.02.022>
- Schramm, H., & Sartorius, A. (2024). The attraction of evil: An investigation of parasocial relationships with “bad” characters. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1501809. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1501809>
- Siya, S., Kavalam, T. J., Baruah, R., Naik, S. J., & Mathew, A. M. (2024). Exploring parasocial relationships in committed individuals. *Journal of Positive Psychology and Wellbeing*, 8(3), 13–23.
- Stever, G. S. (2017). Parasocial theory: Concepts and measures. In L. K. Fuller (Ed.), *The Sage international encyclopedia of mass media and society*. Sage Publications.
- Tukachinsky, R. (2011). Parasocial relationships: The development of a scale and research agenda. *Communication Research Reports*, 28(4), 273–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2011.615179>
- Tukachinsky, R., & Stever, G. S. (2019). Theorizing development of parasocial relationships. *Communication Theory*, 29(3), 297–318. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qty032>
- Vaterlaus, J. M., Patten, E. V., Roche, C., & Young, J. A. (2015). #Gettinghealthy: Social media influence on young adult health behaviors. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 45, 151–157. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.12.013>
- Wills, T. A., Sargent, J. D., Gibbons, F. X., Gerrard, M., & Stoolmiller, M. (2009). Movie exposure to alcohol cues and adolescent alcohol problems. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 23(1), 23–35. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014137>