Articles

Parasocial Romance: A Social Exchange Perspective

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Abstract

Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships that people hold with media figures. Although it has been previously demonstrated that people often feel strong friendships with people that they have never met, parasocial romantic attachments have not been well-studied. In the current study, we examined reasons why people form parasocial romances from a social exchange perspective by surveying participants on perceived costs and benefits of both real-life and parasocial romantic relationships (PSROMs), and on the strength of their PSROMs. We found that participants who reported stronger PSROMs also reported greater perceived benefits (relative to costs) of PSROMs, and that these benefits are surprisingly similar to those received from real-life relationships (RLRs). The results suggest that parasocial relationships are formed for similar reasons as real-life relationships, but that there are some unique costs associated with PSROMs. This research helps to explain *why* people form romantic attachments with media characters.

Keywords: parasocial relationships, romantic relationships, social exchange

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are one-sided, perceived friendships with media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). These attachments can be with real-life celebrities, the fictional characters portrayed by actors, or even cartoon or animated characters. Like real-life social relationships, PSRs can involve strong emotional attachments, and grief upon dissolution (Cohen, 2003), which is, perhaps, unsurprising. For example, Americans age 15 and older spend 2.8 hours per day on average watching television (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012), and thus may spend more time viewing characters from their favorite TV shows than with their real-life friends and family members. However, researchers still do not fully understand *why* people form close relationships that lack reciprocity. The purpose of the current study was to examine the possible benefits received from these relationships to help answer the question of why people form perceived relationships with celebrities and fictional characters.

PSRs versus Real-Life Relationships

Although perceived friendships with media figures that one will never meet or that don't actually exist might be considered strange to some, it is apparent that PSRs are common and can be viewed as an extension of real-life social relationships (Giles, 2002). The development of PSRs may actually be quite similar to the development of real-life relationships (RLRs). Factors that influence real-life interpersonal attraction are also related to PSRs. Common determinants of interpersonal attraction include perceived similarity (Byrne, London, & Reeves, 1968;

Sheffield & Byrne, 1967), and attractiveness (Byrne et al., 1968), which are variables that have also been demonstrated to influence PSRs. For example, PSR strength is related to perceived physical attractiveness of characters (Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Rubin & McHugh, 1987) and perceived similarity to characters (Turner, 1993). In addition, people also respond to the loss of their favorite characters (the character leaves the program or the show is taken off the air) similarly to the loss of close real-life relationships (Cohen, 2003; Cohen, 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006). As Cohen (2003) suggests, although the physical aspect present in RLRs may be missing in PSRs, these types of relationships share many of the emotional aspects of RLRs. However, most research on PSRs has focused on parasocial *friendships* with media figures. Although Horton and Wohl (1956) proposed a variety of PSRs, very little research has looked at other types of relationships with media figures, such as *romantic* attachments.

Parasocial Romance

Although interest in PSRs is growing, little research has focused on romantic PSRs, or what we call *parasocial romances* (PSROMs). Romantic relationships are characterized by positive affect or passion, commitment and physical intimacy in a reciprocal relationship (Moss & Schwebel, 1993; Sternberg, 1986). PSROMs are also characterized by physical attraction, commitment and positive affect, and lack only reciprocity. Tuchakinsky (2010) suggests that PSROMs are indeed similar to real-life romantic attachments, in that both are generally based on physical or sexual attraction, marked by a need for physical and emotional closeness, and accompanied by intense emotions. However, unlike real-life romances, PSROMs are formed with media figures.

PSROMs do not appear to be a new phenomenon; an example was described in Horton and Wohl's (1956) original article. The Lonesome Gal, the star of a self-titled radio program aired in 1951, received offers of marriage from thousands of listeners (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The willingness of thousands of listeners to propose marriage to a complete stranger, known only by her voice, might indicate that these listeners had strong romantic feelings toward The Lonesome Gal. More recently, the incredible popularity of the *Twilight* movie series and the extreme romantic attachment of some fans to characters from these series, indicates that people can, and do, form strong romantic relationships with media figures, as well as friendships. Indeed, parasocial romances may be quite common. These examples also suggest that PSROMs can be formed not only with real-life celebrities, but fictional characters (e.g., Edward from *Twilight*) as well. However, the research on *why* people might form either friendships or parasocial romantic attachments is still unclear. Loneliness was originally proposed to be the driving force behind parasocial attachments, but was not found to be correlated with parasocial relationship strength (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). However, the ability of a media figure to provide company when lonely is only one of the many possible benefits that people may receive from relationships with those figures. In the current study, other possible benefits of PSROMs with media figures were explored from a social exchange perspective.

Social Exchange

Social exchange theory suggests that people form and maintain relationships based on what benefits or resources those relationships can bring them (Blau, 1964). Love, status, information, money, goods, and services have been identified as basic exchangeable resources in general social relationships (Foa & Foa, 1976), although resources exchanged in romantic partnerships are acknowledged to be more specific and include sex and companionship (Sedikides, Oliver, & Campbell, 1994; Sprecher, 1985). In general, social relationships are pursued when the transaction of benefits is rewarding to both parties. When pursuing relationships, people maximize relationship benefits while minimizing relationship costs (Rusbult, 1980; Sprecher, 1998). Social exchange theory has been

used to predict commitment in intimate relationships. Commitment increases with increases in relationship satisfaction, which is based in part on perceived benefits of that relationship (Rusbult, 1983).

For both men and women, commonly identified benefits of real-life romantic relationships include companionship, sexual gratification, and feelings of love and intimacy (Sedikides et al., 1994). However, romantic relationships are acknowledged to come at a price; commonly perceived costs of real-life relationships include stress and worry about the relationship, loss of freedom to socialize with other friends and family members, loss of independence or self-esteem, loss of time and other resources (such as money), and the impact of these losses on other aspects of life (Sedikides et al., 1994).

From a social exchange perspective, parasocial relationships are formed because people derive benefits from them, as with any other relationship, which outweigh any perceived costs. However, it is unknown whether the costs and benefits that PSROMs provide are similar to those of real-life relationships. Specific costs, such as loss of time and loss of money, and certain benefits, such as companionship, seem to be more applicable to PSRs; however, certain benefits, such as sexual gratification, and certain costs, such as stress and worry over the relationship, seem less applicable to PSROMs. This leads to our first research question:

RQ1: How do perceived benefits and costs of PSROMS compare to perceived costs and benefits of RLRs?

A social exchange perspective would also predict that as with real-life relationships, parasocial relationships are formed and maintained because the benefits that are offered outweigh any costs of the relationship, and that the more benefits derived from a relationship, the stronger or more committed that relationship should be (Rusbult, 1983). This may be particularly true for parasocial relationships, assuming that costs of the relationship are relatively minimal. Thus, we predicted that:

H1: PSROM benefits will be positively correlated to PSROM strength

Other Predictors of PSROMs

Sex. Sex differences in the strength of PSRs have previously been examined. However, although some research has found that women experience stronger parasocial relationships than men (Cohen, 1997; Cohen, 2003; Eyal & Cohen, 2006), other research has found no sex differences (e.g., Cole & Leets, 1999; Schmid & Klimmt, 2011; Tian & Hoffner, 2010; Turner, 1993). One explanation for these conflicting findings may be the type of parasocial relationship explored. For example, Greenwood and Long (2011) found no sex difference in PSRs for opposite-sex media figures, but found that women reported stronger PSRs for same-sex media figures. Sex differences in the strength of PSRs may be related to whether these relationships represent friendships or romantic attachments. This leads to our second research question:

RQ2: Do men and women differ in PSROM strength?

It has also been shown that men and women perceive costs and benefits of real-life romantic relationships differently. Women rank intimacy and increased self-growth, self-understanding, and self-esteem as significantly more important benefits of real-life romantic relationships than men, but men rank sexual gratification as a more important benefit of RLRs than women (Sedikides et al., 1994). Men and women also rank the costs of RLRs differently. Women are more likely to perceive loss of personal identity and innocence as more serious costs of romantic relationships, whereas men rank monetary loss as more important (Sedikides et al., 1994). Better understanding sex differences

in perceived costs and benefits of PSROMs might help researchers to better explain why people form parasocial attachments. This leads to our third research question:

RQ3: Do men and women perceive the benefits and costs of PSROMs differently?

Dating Status. Although few studies have investigated the impact of dating status on PSRs, it seems reasonable that romantic parasocial attachments would be more satisfactory for those lacking a real-life romantic relationship, because the relative benefits would be greater compared to those who are already in relationships. Although Cohen (1997) found no overall difference in the strength of PSRs between single and dating participants, the focus of this study was on favorite television characters, which could have reflected either romantic or friendly parsocial relationships. On the other hand, Greenwood and Long (2011) found that single participants had more intense PSRs with opposite-sex media figures than did those who were dating, which may have indicated romantic attachments. This leads us to our second hypothesis:

H2: Single participants will have stronger PSROMs than participants who were in real-life romantic relationships.

Social exchange theory might suggest that single participants would be more likely to form opposite-sex PSRs because perceived benefits of these relationships would be greater than for dating participants. However, it is unknown if costs and benefits would be perceived differently for single vs. dating participants. This leads to our next research question:

RQ4: How does relationship status affect perceptions of costs and benefits of PSROMs?

Finally, we have previously acknowledged that little research has focused on romantic PSRs. In addition, little research has examined differences in the types of parasocial relationships that can be formed. As Giles (2002) acknowledged, PSRs can be formed with real-life celebrities, fictional fantasy characters, or even cartoon characters, but the qualitative differences in these relationships has not yet been explored. This dimension of a media figure's identity is described as authenticity (Giles, 2002), and the degree of authenticity of a relationship may influence multiple aspects of the relationship. In particular, it is unknown whether or not the authenticity of the relationship would be related to relationship strength. This leads to our final research question:

RQ5: Is the strength of the PSROM related to the degree of authenticity of the relationship?

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 86 undergraduate college students (44 women, 41 men) from a medium-sized regional university in the Midwestern United States. One participant did not identify his/her sex. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 36 (M = 20.45 years, SD = 3.87 years). The majority of participants were Caucasian. Less than half of participants identified as single (n = 35), while the rest reporting being in a relationship (n = 51).

Procedure

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling from psychology classes and received extra-credit for their participation. Study procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. College students were thought to be appropriate for this study as frequent consumers of television and movies. Printed surveys were administered to participants in a class-room setting during regularly scheduled class times. Surveys contained

questions regarding perceived costs and benefits of participants' real-life relationships, perceived costs and benefits of participants' parasocial relationships, parasocial relationship strength, and demographic information.

Measures

Parasocial relationships. Participants were asked to think of a favorite media character that they personally found physically attractive, and to describe what media outlet (i.e., what movie, television show, etc.) that figure was known from. These instructions are similar to those used by other researchers in the area of parasocial relationships (e.g., Cohen, 1997).

Eighty-two of the 86 participants identified a favorite media figure that they found physically attractive (the four who did not were dropped from analyses). The most commonly cited media figures included Jacob Black (*n* = 7), Edward Cullen (*n* = 6), and Bella Swan (*n* = 4), all fictional characters from the *Twilight* movie series. Another commonly identified media figure was identified both as herself, Megan Fox (*n* = 4) and as her character from the *Transformers* series (*n* = 2). Jessica Alba (an actress) and the fictional character Jackie from *That 70s Show* were each identified twice; no other media figure was mentioned more than once.

After identifying their media figure, participants completed the Multiple Parasocial Relationships Scale (the MPRS; Tuchakinsky, 2010) regarding this media figure. This scale was developed to distinguish between parasocial friendships and parasocial romantic attachments. Participants indicated their level of agreement with statements such as "I would be able to count on X in times of need" and "For me, X could be the ideal romantic partner" on five-point Likert scales (the complete list of items and their means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1).

In the current study, ten questions taken from the MPSR (Tuchakinsky, 2010) that were related to romance were averaged to create a composite PSROM score between 1 and 5, which represented the intensity of a participant's romantic attachment, both emotional and physical, to their identified media figure. The same was done for the 12 items for the parasocial friendship subscale. Higher scores indicated either greater PSROMs or parasocial friendships. For PSROMs, scores ranged from 1 to 5, with an average score of 3.19 (*SD* = .83). Inter-item reliabilities were assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α = .89). For parasocial friendships, scores ranged from 1 to 4.8, with an average of 2.90 (*SD* = .96, α = .93). We used a paired-samples *t*-test to compare scores on these subscales. Scores on the PSROM subscale were significantly higher than scores on the parasocial friendship subscale, *t*(81) = 3.48, *p* = .001. The higher score on the PSROM subscale of the MPRS indicates that participants were, as instructed, reporting on a parasocial romantic attachment.

Costs and benefits. Participants were asked to think about their current or last relationship partner. Using five-point Likert scales, participants rated their level of agreement with 17 statements of perceived relationship costs and benefits, such as "When I spend time with X, I don't feel so alone." The 17 statement items were previously identified as important benefits or costs of romantic relationships (Sedikides et al., 1994). Other possible benefits included sexual gratification, increased happiness and elevated mood, increased understanding of one's self and of romantic relationships, perceived control in a relationship, and the unique fulfillment of needs by that relationship. Possible costs of romantic relationships included the loss of time spent in other relationships, loss of time and money, loss of self-esteem and privacy, increased stress, and increased worry about the possible loss of the romantic relationship.

Table 1

The Multiple Parasocial Relationships Scale

Parasocial Friendship Items	Mean (*SD*)
I could reveal negative things about myself honestly and fully (deeply) to him/her.	2.46 (1.24)
Sometimes, I wish I knew what X would do in my situation.	2.46 (1.22)
I could reveal positive things about myself honestly and fully (deeply) to him/her.	3.26 (1.31)
Sometimes, I wish I could ask X for advice.	2.62 (1.33)
I think X could be a friend of mine.	3.63 (1.16)
I would be able to count on X in times of need.	2.34 (1.30)
I would give him/her emotional support.	3.30 (1.30)
X would be able to count on me in times of need.	3.43 (1.32)
I would will to share my possessions with him/her.	3.06 (1.36)
I could trust him/her completely.	2.48 (1.31)
I could have a warm relationship with him/her.	3.20 (1.23)
I want to promote the well-being of X.	3.07 (1.32)
Parasocial Romance Items	
I find X very attractive physically.	4.46 (.88)
I think X is quite handsome/pretty.	4.55 (.82)
X is very sexy.	4.28 (1.11)
X fits my ideal standards of physical beauty/handsomeness.	3.96 (1.14)
I want X physically, emotionally, mentally.	2.88 (1.38)
For me, X could be the perfect romantic partner.	2.91 (1.43)
Sometimes I think that X and I are just meant for each other.	2.01 (1.19)
I wish X could know my thoughts, my fears, and my hopes.	1.89 (1.04)
X influences my mood.	2.22 (1.29)
I adore X.	2.68 (1.39)

Scores for the eight perceived benefits of RLRs and PSROMs were averaged for each type of relationship. The average benefits score for RLRs was 3.68 (*SD* = .84; α = .89). For PSROMs, the average benefits score was 2.11 (*SD* = .81; α = .86).

Scores for the nine perceived costs of both RLRs and PSROMS were also averaged for each type of relationship. The average perceived relationship costs score for RLRs was 2.80 (*SD* = .73; α = .74). For PSROMs, the average costs score was 1.40 (*SD* = .65; α = .92).

Results

RQ1: How do perceived benefits and costs of PSROMS compare to perceived costs and benefits of RLRs?

We first examined differences in perceived benefits between PSROMs and real-life romantic relationships. The results of a paired-samples t-test indicated that the average perceived benefits score for PSROMS (*M* = 2.11, *SD* = .81) was significantly lower than for RLRs (*M* = 3.68, *SD* = .84); *t*(81) = 11.29, *p* < .001. For both RLRs and PSROMs, however, participants rated benefits similarly. Top benefits for both types of relationships included increased happiness, decreased loneliness, and feeling better after interacting with the person or character (see Table 2). These items also mirrored the most important benefits of romantic relationships identified in previous research (Sedikides et al., 1994).

Table 2

Perceived Benefits of Real-Life Relationships (RLRs) and Parasocial Romances (PSROMs)

	RLR	PSROM
Benefit	**Mean (*SD*)**	**Mean (*SD*)**
Makes me happy	4.27 (1.05)	2.84 (1.21)
Makes me not feel alone	4.17 (.98)	2.55 (1.31)
Makes me feel better	4.01 (1.02)	2.51 (1.32)
Is sexually gratifying	3.87 (1.17)	2.31 (1.20)
Helps me learn about relationships	3.74 (1.14)	1.99 (1.13)
Fulfills needs that can't be met by other people	3.62 (1.39)	1.44 (.92)
Helps me understand myself	3.44 (1.24)	1.93 (1.20)
Do what I want them to	2.23 (1.09)	1.41 (.84)

We found that the average perceived costs score for PSROMS (*M* = 1.39, *SD* = .65) was also significantly lower than for RLRs (*M* = 2.80, *SD* = .73); *t*(81) = 12.45, *p* < .001. However, the individual perceived costs of RLRs and PSROMs differed greatly (see Table 3).

For real-life relationships, the top perceived costs included less time to date others, having less time in general due to the relationship, and added stress about the relationship, which again closely mirrored previous findings (Sedikides et al., 1994). For PSROMs, however, the top perceived costs included making the participant feel worse about himself or herself, spending less time with friends and family, and having less time in general. Although people perceive similar benefits of PSROMs compared to RLRs, the costs of PSROMs appear to be different from those incurred in RLRs.

H1: PSROM benefits will be positively correlated to PSROM strength

Although the majority of people in this study (95%) did identify a favorite media character they found physically attractive, the intensity of their relationship with their character varied. Social exchange theory would predict that the more benefits and fewer costs perceived with PSROMs, the more intense or stronger the romantic attachment with media figures should be. The benefit-to-cost ratio was calculated for PSROMs by dividing participants' average perceived benefits score by their average perceived costs score, and we examined the correlation between this ratio and PSROM strength. Strength of PSROMs was indeed positively correlated with the benefit-to-cost ratio for PSROMs, *r*(80) = .46, *p* < .001. Hypothesis 1 was supported. PSROMs were stronger for participants who also perceived greater benefits (relative to costs) of that relationship.

We used correlations to explore *which* perceived benefits of PSROMs were associated with stronger PSROMs to better understand the reasons why people form PSROMs. Strength of PSROMs was significantly, positively correlated to all benefits except for "I like X because they do what I want them to do" (see Table 4). The benefits that had the strongest correlations with PSROM strength included feelings of happiness and companionship, feeling better about one's self, and sexual gratification.

RQ2: Do men and women differ in PSROM strength?

One goal of the current study was to investigate whether there was a sex difference in the strength of romantic parasocial relationships. An independent-samples *t*-test was used to analyze sex differences in mean PSROM

Table 3

Perceived Costs of Real-Life Relationships (RLRs) and Parasocial Romances (PSROMs)

	RLR	PSROM
Cost	Mean (*SD*)	Mean (*SD*)
Less time dating other people	3.68 (1.51)	1.38 (.83)
Loss of time in general	3.66 (1.28)	1.48 (.85)
Stress about relationship	3.37 (1.32)	1.35 (.79)
Less time with friends and family	3.23 (1.30)	1.52 (.93)
Less money	2.60 (1.33)	1.39 (.89)
Worry about end of relationship	2.45 (1.35)	1.26 (.68)
Less privacy	2.27 (1.14)	1.26 (.68)
Makes me feel worse about self	1.96 (1.15)	1.54 (.93)
Loss of control	1.95 (1.08)	1.38 (.86)

Table 4

Correlations between PSROM Strength and Perceived Benefits

	PSL	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	B6	B7
Not feel alone (B1)	.60***	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sexual grat. (B2)	.50***	.35**	1	-	-	-	-	-
Makes me happy (B3)	.62***	.56***	.59***	1	-	-	-	-
Understand Relations (B4)	.30**	.48***	.07	.33**	1	-	-	-
Understand self (B5)	.22	.53***	.12	.42***	.72***	1	-	-
Feel better (B6)	.57***	.55***	.53***	.76***	.39***	.50***	1	-
Do what I want (B7)	.15	.32**	.17	.22*	.53***	.49***	.25*	1
Fulfills needs (B8)	.24*	.47***	.24*	.34**	.42***	.59***	.41***	.59***

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

scores. There was no difference in the strength of PSROMs between men ($n = 38$, $M = 3.02$, $SD = .84$) and women ($n = 44$, $M = 3.33$, $SD = .82$); $t(80) = -1.68$, $p = .098$. On average, men and women appear to have equally strong romantic PSRs.

RQ3: Are there sex differences in perceived benefits and costs of PSROMs?

We also wanted to know if, as with real-life relationships, men and women perceived different benefits and costs of PSROMs. We first used an independent-samples *t*-test to examine sex differences in average perceived benefits and average perceived costs. There was no difference in the average benefits score between men ($M = 2.09$, $SD = .87$) and women ($M = 2.13$, $SD = .76$); $t(80) = -.24$, $p = .816$. There was also no difference in the average perceived costs of PSROMs between men ($M = 1.43$, $SD = .71$) and women ($M = 1.36$, $SD = .59$); $t(80) = .50$, $p = .621$.

We further explored any possible sex differences in ratings of specific benefits and costs using individual independent-samples *t*-tests. There were no sex differences in any perceived benefits of PSROMs (see Table 5), and only one significant sex difference in perceived costs of PSROMs between men and women (see Table 6). As a whole, men and women appear to derive similar benefits from and perceive similar costs of romantic parasocial relationships.

H2: Dating status will be related to PSROM strength

Table 5

Differences in Perceived Benefits of PSROMs by Sex

	Men	Women	
Benefit	**Mean (*SD*)**	**Mean (*SD*)**	**t**
Makes me happy	2.66 (1.34)	2.95 (1.12)	-1.09
Makes me not feel alone	2.18 (1.11)	2.39 (1.26)	-.76
Feel better	2.47 (1.29)	2.59 (1.35)	-.40
Sexually gratifying	2.68 (1.38)	2.43 (1.27)	.87
Helps me learn about relationships	1.82 (1.09)	2.09 (1.18)	-1.09
Fulfills needs that can't be met by other people	1.55 (1.08)	1.32 (.74)	1.16
Helps me understand myself	1.87 (1.17)	1.93 (1.23)	-.24
Do what I want them to	1.45 (.95)	1.32 (.67)	.72

Table 6

Differences in Perceived Costs of PSROMs by Sex

	Men	Women	
Benefit	**Mean (*SD*)**	**Mean (*SD*)**	**t**
Less time dating other people	1.34 (.85)	1.42 (.82)	-.41
Loss of time in general	1.39 (.86)	1.55 (.85)	-.80
Stress about relationship	1.39 (.86)	1.32 (.74)	.44
Less time with friends and family	1.58 (1.11)	1.48 (.76)	.49
Less money	1.37 (.75)	1.41 (1.00)	-.21
Worry about end of relationship	1.32 (.81)	1.20 (.55)	.74
Less privacy	1.29 (.80)	1.23 (.57)	.41
Makes me feel worse about self	1.61 (1.00)	1.48 (.88)	.62
Loss of control	1.61 (1.08)	1.18 (.54)	2.30*

*$p < .05$.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that participants who were single would have stronger PSROMS than would participants who were in relationships. The results of an independent-samples t-test revealed that there was not a significant difference in PSROM intensity between single participants (n = 34, M = 3.36, SD = .75) and participants in long-term relationships (n = 48, M = 3.06, SD = .88); t(80) = 1.57, p = .12. This hypothesis was not supported.

RQ4: How does relationship status affect perceptions of costs and benefits of PSROMs?

This research question was about potential differences in how participants who were either single or in a real-life romantic relationship felt about the costs and benefits of PSROMs. We conducted an independent-samples t-test to examine relationship status differences in average perceived benefits of PSROMs. Participants who were single reported significantly higher average benefits of PSROMs (n = 34, M = 2.38, SD = .82) than did dating participants (n = 38, M = 1.94, SD = .76); t(78) = 2.53, p = .013. Additional independent-samples t-tests showed that single and dating participants differed on specific benefits (see Table 7). Specifically, single participants were more likely to feel better after interacting with their media figure, have unique needs fulfilled by that media figure, and have increased self-understanding due to their media figure, compared to dating participants.

Table 7

Perceived Benefits of PSROMs by Dating Status

	Single	Dating	
Benefit	**Mean (*SD*)**	**Mean (*SD*)**	**t**
Makes me happy	3.09 (1.10)	2.66 (1.27)	1.16
Makes me not feel alone	2.57 (1.23)	2.12 (1.12)	1.73
Feel better	2.94 (1.31)	2.20 (1.25)	2.65**
Sexually gratifying	2.74 (1.22)	2.42 (1.33)	1.12
Helps me learn about relationships	2.20 (1.16)	1.84 (1.10)	1.46
Helps me understand myself	2.31 (1.30)	1.66 (1.06)	2.56*
Fulfills needs that can't be met by other people	1.71 (1.02)	1.24 (.80)	2.41*
Do what I want them to	1.46 (.74)	1.38 (.90)	.42

*p < .05. **p < .01.

We used an independent-samples *t*-test to examine dating status differences in average perceived costs of PSROMs. There was no difference in the perceived costs of PSROMs between single participants (*M* = 1.52, *SD* = .71) and dating participants (*M* = 1.31, *SD* = .60; *t*(80) = 1.44, *p* = .153). We also conducted multiple independent-samples *t*-tests to further compare perceived costs of PSROMs for single versus dating participants (see Table 8). There were no differences in any of the perceived costs of PSROMs between single and dating participants.

RQ5: Is the strength of the PSROM related to the degree of authenticity of the relationship?

Overall, 57 participants identified fictional characters, and 23 identified real-life celebrities. The origin of the media figures of two participants could not be determined. Interestingly, more participants identified fictional media characters compared to real-life celebrities. In fact, two of the participants in the current study named animated characters as their favorite media figure they found physically attractive. We used an independent samples *t*-test to compare PSROM scores for real-life celebrities (more authentic) versus fictional media figures (less authentic). There was no difference in the strength of PSROMs with fictional characters (M = 3.21, SD = .82) compared to PSROMs with real-life celebrities (*M* = 3.19, *SD* = .90); *t*(78) = -.07, *p* = .947. This indicates that the one-sided attachments people form to fictional characters are just as strong as those formed with actual celebrities, and the degree of authenticity of parasocial relationships does not influence the strength of those relationships.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to try to explain why people form parasocial relationships using a social exchange perspective. Specifically, we examined how dating status and sex might be related to perceived costs and benefits of romantic PSRs and how these variables are related to parasocial relationship strength. The results of this study indicate that people do perceive benefits of PSROMs and that these benefits are similarly ranked to those received from real-life romantic relationships (see Sedikides et al., 1994). In addition, the strength of PSROMs is related to perceived benefits, again, similarly to real-life reciprocal relationships (Rusbult, 1983). Sometimes these benefits were surprising; for example, sexual gratification was the fourth ranked benefit of both RLRs and PSROMs, and sexual gratification derived from PSROMs was strongly correlated with PSROM strength. These findings suggest that parasocial relationships function similarly to real-life relationships regarding social exchange. People form PSROMs because they perceive relationship benefits that outweigh any apparent costs.

Table 8

Perceived Costs of PSROMs by Dating Status

	Single	Dating	
Benefit	**Mean (*SD*)**	**Mean (*SD*)**	**t**
Less time dating other people	1.53 (.90)	1.26 (.77)	1.36
Loss of time in general	1.68 (1.04)	1.33 (.66)	1.83
Stress about relationship	1.50 (.86)	1.25 (.73)	1.42
Less time with friends and family	1.68 (1.07)	1.42 (.82)	1.25
Less money	1.50 (.86)	1.31 (.80)	.94
Worry about end of relationship	1.32 (.64)	1.23 (.72)	.75
Less privacy	1.29 (.63)	1.23 (.72)	.42
Makes me feel worse about self	1.69 (.97)	1.44 (.90)	1.15
Loss of control	1.47 (.83)	1.31 (.88)	.82

Relationship status was found to be related to certain benefits of PSROMs. Specifically, single participants were significantly more likely than dating participants to report feeling better after interacting with their chosen media figure, that their media figure helped them understand themselves better, and that their media figure met needs in their lives that were unfulfilled by other relationships. These results support the conclusion drawn by Greenwood and Long (2011) that opposite-sex (and likely romantic) parasocial relationships may compensate for absent real-life romantic attachments. This also suggests that the benefits derived from PSROMs are different than perceived benefits of friendly parasocial attachments. Future research could explore perceived benefits from friendly PSRs using what is known about social exchange of resources in real-life friendships. However, relationship status was not directly related to PSROM strength. Although being single was related to increased perceived benefits of PSROMs, relationship status is obviously not the only factor that is related to PSROM strength. For example, participants high in Need to Belong, a construct regarding people's need to be around and involved with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) were found to have greater perceived intimacy with opposite-sex media figures only if they were single (Greenwood & Long, 2011). Future research should examine other factors that may explain the indirect relationship between relationship status and PSROM strength.

Although there were no differences in the ranking of the benefits received from RLRs and PSROMs, the perceived costs differed by relationship type. Although still not perceived as a great cost of PSROMs, participants most strongly agreed that their identified media figure sometimes made them feel worse about themselves. A possible explanation for this finding is that there may be a degree of social comparison regarding PSROMs (Festinger, 1954). Participants may compare themselves to overly idealistic relationships or relationship partners (as are often portrayed in the media), which may lead to feelings of self-discrepancy and dissatisfaction (Higgins, 1987). However, if the benefits of PSROMs (and the ease with which PSROMs can be maintained) outweigh these costs, participants may simply accept increased feelings of dissatisfaction about themselves. Future research should further explore potential costs and possible effects of PSROMS, and the role of social comparison in forming and maintaining these relationships.

Interestingly, the degree of authenticity of a PSROM was not related to the strength of that relationship. Most participants (70%) identified the name of a fictional media character rather than the name of a real-life celebrity. In addition, PSROMs with fictional characters were just as strong as those with real-life celebrities. This is an aspect

of parasocial relationships that is not well explained by the social psychology literature. Future research should further examine how PSRs differ qualitatively based on the type of media figure (real-life or fictional).

There were some limitations to this study. First, we did not ask participants their sexual orientation – rather, we asked participants which sex they primarily identified with, and asked them to answer questions about a favorite media figure that they were physically attracted to. It is possible that heterosexual participants identified a physically attractive same-sex media figure that they were not romantically attracted to, which would influence their PSROM scores. The sample size of the current study was also small and the sample was composed of college students, which limited the types of analyses that could be run and the generalizations that could be drawn from the results. To address these issues, future researchers should increase and diversify the sample size and address the issue of sexual orientation.

Another possible limitation of the current study may be the benefits statements used. The means for all perceived PSROM benefits were low, indicating that in general, these benefits were not perceived as good reasons for attachment to a media figure. However, as previously discussed, perceived benefits of PSROMs were higher for those who had stronger PSROMs, suggesting that at least some of these benefits are involved in perceived, as well as real, romantic relationships. On the other hand, there may be other, unexplored benefits of PSROMS that are simply not comparable to RLRs. Future researchers may want to further explore benefits specific to PSROMs.

Finally, the role of reciprocity may be of interest to future researchers. A basic characteristic of romantic relationships is reciprocity, or equity of exchange (Moss & Schwebel, 1993), which is thought to be lacking in parasocial relationships. Researchers have found that a lack of reciprocity or imbalance in relationships (such that one party is overbenefitted while the other is underbenefitted) is related to dissatisfaction in the relationship (e.g., Sprecher, 2001). People may differ in their feelings of reciprocity in their PSROMs, which may influence the strength of and satisfaction with those relationships. For example, the person with the PSROM may perceive that their identified media figure receives financial support through merchandise expenses incurred, or emotional support through activity such as fan letters, or other ways in which a fan may express their appreciation using technology (e.g., blogs, audience voting, or social media sites). These actions may be interpreted as investments in the relationship, which could change how equitable the relationship is perceived to be, thus influencing satisfaction and commitment (Rusbult, 1983). Future research should investigate perceptions of reciprocity and satisfaction in parasocial relationships and determine whether feelings of reciprocity relate to PSROM strength.

Conclusion

The current study contributes to the field of research on parasocial relationships. More specifically, we have helped to clarify *why* people form romantic parasocial attachments. Our findings support a social exchange perspective of parasocial relationships, suggesting that the benefits perceived from these faux relationships are similar to the ones involved in RLRs, and that the costs are perceived to be lower. Our results also indicate that PSROM strength is directly related to the perception of benefits. People appear to form PSROMs for the same reasons they form real life relationships; because of the drive to maximize benefits while minimizing costs (Rusbult, 1980).

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