

THE POISON OF PARASOCIALITY

How an unrecognized issue is destroying lives

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Imagine giving someone all of your attention. Imagine sending them gifts, messages, and investing so much of your own free time only for them to do nothing for you. In fact, they don't know that you even exist. They don't know who "you" are. Parasocial relationships are a commonly unrecognized issue. The gray area between a hobby and obsession. These relationships form when an individual invests themselves too much into the lives of another, most commonly seen between celebrities or influencers and their viewers, which can create a harmful, one-sided connection between the two. When people get too involved in the life of someone who doesn't even know that they exist, it can lead to problematic situations for both parties. It needs to stop.

Vulnerable people are the most prone to being roped into a parasocial relationship. Those suffering from untreated depression, loneliness, anxiety, and various other mental health issues tend to find comfort in their favorite celebrities or content creators, as they build a sense of community with other viewers. Although this alone is not a bad thing, having access, typically at a young age, to a virtual, welcoming community led by an influencer can be a catalyst for a parasocial relationship. With the seemingly all-positive atmosphere, an impressionable viewerbase, one starts to believe that nothing will go wrong with the relationships created through the pixels of their screens.

Because a parasocial relationship occurs only through online interaction, the viewers are usually only seeing the "good side" of the influencer. The side that they choose to post for the world to see. Viewers begin to believe that their favorite influencer could never do something wrong or be problematic. That they are a perfect human being. They begin to idolize. And while having an idol is not necessarily an issue, idolizing someone based solely off of what they choose to share with you as the viewer leads to a cherry-picked depiction of a person. That depiction is not real. The viewer no longer idolizes the person, but rather, idolizes the image created by them. A character. This is unhealthy.

Influencers are people. They will make mistakes, some greater than others (looking at you, Kanye), and people will get upset. The image of the influencer or celebrity that they created in their mind was broken; the reality that they never wanted to admit to themselves was proved to be true. Depending on the severity of the influencer's mistake, the parasocial viewer might feel angered or disgusted at themselves for having idolized someone who could have made such a mistake. In extreme cases, these online influencers turn out to be vile

people behind the illuminated screens of their YouTube channels, Twitter timelines, and Instagram feeds. Far too many times have there been occurrences of influencers using their idolized image to take advantage of their viewers. That is unacceptable. Scamming, coercing, or even grooming impressionable fans is easy for someone with such a high social status.

For every Yin there is a Yang. Parasocial viewers happen to be the Yang. A much more swept-under-the-rug issue, occurring most to female influencers and streamers, are their obsessively parasocial fans. Those who believe that their relationship with the streamer is more than just viewer and creator. They get attached and start to think they are in a more special position than her "typical viewer." Hint: they are not special. A concept that someone deeply affected by parasociality is not able to grasp. This usually ends up in making uncomfortable and invasive comments towards the streamers who are just trying to do their job, and donating large sums of money to them just to get briefly recognized. When these efforts and emotions are left unreciprocated, some parasocial viewers resort to dangerous methods in getting what they believe that they rightfully deserve. Such methods include stalking, breaking into properties, and even attempting to harm the streamer, and that is just scratching the surface. Why should these situations just be accepted as "something that just happens," rather than issues with a fundamental cause that needs to be addressed?

Many people dismiss such issues by saying that the influencers were just horrible people or that the viewers were just unhinged lunatics. While both are true, they should not be occurring this frequently. High status influencers will always exist and with that, those idolizing them will also exist. Platforms that host these influencers need to have better safety regulations in place that help prevent these extremes from happening. There should be much stricter regulations on the comments that people can make towards streamers, and platforms should have a report system that actually works to investigate any claims made on it rather than just exist because it's required to be there. Society needs to be better informed about the dangers of parasociality so that viewers are able to recognize the signs in order to prevent themselves from getting tangled up, and influencers should be able to feel safe when doing their jobs. The toxicity of parasocial relationships is prevalent not because it can't be helped, but because it has been overlooked by our society.

