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**“I’m not your friend”: Content type influence on parasocial relationship
formation on YouTube**

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Abstract

Media consumers are increasingly using online video platforms, such as YouTube which has record high numbers of viewers and subscribers compared to other media sites. This viewership increases the popularity of content creators who can be divided into two main categories; relationship-based or idea-based content. YouTube viewers bond with their favorite celebrities which has translated into parasocial relationships. In this study, explanatory qualitative research examines whether the two types of content found on YouTube, relationship-based or idea-based, influences the parasocial relationships formed. As the results show, relationship-based YouTubers consistently form more intense parasocial relationships than idea-based YouTubers.

Introduction

Research on parasocial relationships has developed significantly over time. At first, studies of parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions were developed by analyzing television celebrities with whom viewers had developed a sense of intimate connection (Horton and Wohl, 1956). As television episodes were consistently watched, characters were repetitively viewed, this caused the celebrity to become part of the observer's everyday routine (Horton and Wohl, 1956). This phenomenon created a one-sided feeling of connection where the audience saw characters as a "friend, counselor, comforter, and model" (Horton and Wohl, 1956, p. 4). A myriad of studies were dedicated to understanding the nature of both parasocial relationships and interactions, leading to a distinction between the two (Hartmann and Goldhoorn, 2011). Newer research has expanded upon this and focused on parasocial relationship and interaction formation on emerging social media technology (Brown, 2015). These studies show that content creators are viewed like television personalities, meaning parasocial relationships and interactions can be formed online (Chen, 2016). Social media is quickly growing, while ushering in a new age of media consumption. The YouTube slogan "broadcast yourself" is consistent with forming parasocial relationships as creators can upload and share original videos of themselves (Chen, 2016; YouTube, 2000; de Berail and Bungener, 2022). This allows for more open self-expression while also permitting content creators to easily hide certain aspects of their identity (Chen, 2016; de Berail and Bungener, 2022; Lange, 2008). Thus, YouTube allows individuals to create versions of themselves regardless of age, race, gender, and body type (de Berail and Bungener, 2022; Lange, 2008). While parasocial relationships have been studied in television actors, less is

known with respect to social media. Thus, this study aims to contribute a richer understanding of parasocial relationship formation on YouTube by drawing on previous literature and conducting an exploratory quantitative study of the degree to which video content type influences parasocial relationship formation. To develop findings, comments were analyzed from videos of two different creators representing the main types of content seen on YouTube, relationship-based and idea-based.

Parasocial relationships

Parasocial relationships were first studied by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956), their work focused mainly on parasocial interaction. 'Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance' hypothesizes that the viewing experience of television broadcasts are similar to face-to-face interactions. Viewers feel they are being addressed personally by television celebrities, as though they are having a one-on-one conversation. Although the viewer perceives it to be mutual, this interaction is one-sided, and is controlled by the performer. Thus, the interaction remains parasocial as the performer is not able to reciprocate communication (Horton and Wohl, 1956). An example of this would be viewers directly addressing the television as they watch a broadcast, unphased by the inability of the performer to communicate back (Rihl and Wegener, 2017).

One important distinction overlooked by Horton and Wohl and developed by subsequent scholarship is the distinction between parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships (Rihl and Wegener, 2017). Parasocial relationships are now being described as the result of multiple parasocial interactions; this phenomenon remains past the initial interaction, forming parasocial relationships (Rihl and Wegener, 2017; Brown, 2015; Dibble et al., 2016). While interaction is limited to a single act, parasocial relationships will be developed through repetitive interaction, while still remaining one-sided; this causes a closer bond to be created (Rihl and Wegener, 2017). An example of this would be repetitive viewing of a weekly broadcast where the host directly addresses the viewers. The viewers start to perceive the host as a friend, causing them to think about the host even when the show is not being aired. The relationship is solidified as the viewer maintains an emotional connection to the host between periods of interaction (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Thus, it is imperative that the celebrity is consistently viewed in order to create a

feeling of intimacy that is further developed through a rapport of stories and experiences (Horton and Wohl, 1956).

When defined as the result of repetitive parasocial interactions, reoccurring media platforms become breeding grounds for parasocial relationships to develop (Hartmann and Klimmt, 2005). During the development of the relationship, viewers will designate different roles for celebrities to play in their daily lives; thus, viewers may perceive media figures as friends (Rubin et al., 1985), a part of their identity (Chen, 2016), or as a role model (Reinikainen et al., 2019). Media platforms encourage viewers to feel as though they are a part of a community as well as reinforce a false idea that viewers may meet their favorite celebrity; both attributes are important components to forming parasocial relationships (Rubin et al., 1985).

Studies that look at the parasocial relationship formation on video platforms, specifically YouTube, are sparse. Chen (2016) studied the construction of self, self-representation, and the construction of relationships between Taiwanese YouTubers and viewers. Chen concluded that YouTubers, like television actors, enlist and form parasocial relationships. Thus, YouTube can be recognized as a platform where viewers “parasocially develop social relations” (Chen, 2016, p. 252). Compared to other social media platforms, YouTube is likely the most conducive to developing parasocial relationships due to the structure of the platform; as it creates a disconnect between content creators and viewers while maintaining regularly scheduled videos that cause parasocial interactions, forming stronger parasocial relationships.

Parasocial Relationship Formation Variables on YouTube based on literature

Camera angle

One of the variables addressed by Horton and Wohl (1956) is the direct addressment of the audience. When the television host directly addresses the audience as if it were a private interaction, a feeling of intimacy is formed which causes a social relationship. By direct addressment, a simulated conversation of give and take is created. Looking directly into the camera or making the camera eye-level creates an illusion of intimacy. The viewer is triggered to believe this is an actual interaction, “luring the audience member to [adjust] his or her behavior accordingly” (Reinikainen et al., 2019, p. 282).

Analogous to television, YouTube vlogs allow content creators to stimulate similar interactions (Reinikainen et al., 2019; Zhang, 2018). Vlogs will directly address the audience, film at eye level, or the YouTuber will look directly into the camera (Reinikainen et al., 2019). Zhang (2018) researched beauty vlogger Zoe Snugg, concluding that as the camera moved to eye-level, the YouTuber's popularity and parasocial relationships increased.

Quality of video

Imperative to the formation of parasocial relationships is the ability of the interactions to simulate a fictional world where the viewer and celebrity have an intimate relationship (Horton and Wohl, 1956). To create this fictional world, the quality of the video must be of high caliber. If the video quality is not up to par, the fictional world is shattered and the viewers enjoyment of the content decreases, thus lowering parasocial formation (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Stein et al., 2020).

The production value of vloggers' videos are dependent on several factors including direction of video chosen, either portrait or landscape orientation, camera quality, and editing (Stein et al., 2020). With higher production value, viewers are easily immersed in the video, which in turn, affects parasocial development. If the camera quality or production value is low, the viewer is less immersed in the fictional world, decreasing the chances of a parasocial relationship forming (Stein et al., 2020). Therefore, horizontal camera positioning, more complex editing, and higher camera quality is preferable for audience members (Stein et al., 2020). The more effort a YouTuber puts into their video, the more likely parasocial relationships will form (Stein et al., 2020).

Repetitive viewing

Parasocial relationships are formed through repetitive parasocial interactions (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Through repetitively viewing a broadcast, the viewer establishes a continued relationship that is more intimate (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Repetitive viewing allows the viewer to form narratives about celebrities' lives that may not necessarily be true, which is done by using past shared experiences with the celebrity to develop a new performance or story (Honeycutt, 2010). An example of this would be a viewer talking or thinking about a celebrity in contexts they have not seen them in, thus creating fake and potentially untrue scenarios. Additionally, viewers may

imagine being one of the characters during the viewing process (Cohen, 2004). Thus, repetitive viewing not only increases the viewer's ability to form false narratives but also encourages them to feel like they are one with the television host.

Repetitive viewing is highly encouraged through the YouTube format as a consistent posting schedule, especially weekly uploads are encouraged (Clark, 2024; YouTube Canada, 2023; Par, 2024; Dennis, 2024). Additionally, YouTube alerts subscribers of new content urging further consumption. Consistently new content encourages viewers to form a routine around the YouTuber (The Colin and Samir Show, 2020). Once this routine is formed, viewers can more easily create false scenarios to increase the strength of their parasocial relationship (Honeycutt, 2010).

Feeling of intimacy/ self-disclosure

Parasocial relationships are formed in stages. The first stage is initiation followed by experimentation and companionship, finally is the feeling of intimacy (Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019). The more intimate a viewer feels toward a celebrity, the more likely they are to form a strong parasocial relationship (Horton and Wohl, 1956). The bond that is created between viewers and celebrities affects the illusion of intimacy (de Berail and Bungener, 2022). The most common way to enlist a sense of intimacy is to engage in self-disclosure (de Berail and Bungener, 2022; Ferchaud et al., 2018; Thelwall et al., 2022). Self-disclosure creates perceived intimacy and encourages trust from the audience (Ferchaud et al., 2018).

Thelwall et al. determined that as the amount of self-disclosure increased so did the parasocial formation potential of the video (2022). Self-disclosure is the most reliable indicator for parasocial relationship formation (Thelwall et al., 2022). Disclosure of undesirable information can lead to a negative effect on the parasocial relationship between a content creator and viewer (Greene et al., 2006). Negative self-disclosure, or the sharing of controversial information, continues to encourage the feeling of authenticity meaning the parasocial relationship is not shattered.

Idea-based and relationship-based content on YouTube

Two broad types of content creators have emerged with the popularization of YouTube. Although not established in scholarly literature, these terms are used, promoted, and coined by Collin and

Semier. Collin and Semier are, themselves, YouTubers and podcasters who dissect the trajectory of YouTubers' careers and offer advice on how to grow viewership and increase popularity. According to Collin and Semier, YouTubers are either relationship-based or idea-based content creators (The Colin and Samir Show, 2020).

An idea-based YouTuber is someone whose content is centered on an idea or topic. "The content is... rooted in the idea". One example Semier gives of a YouTube video like this is titled "I jumped in a pool of sharks". This idea is interesting, and a viewer would be willing to watch the video regardless of who the creator was. Thus, viewers are not attached to the creator, but merely the idea or topic of the video. Parasocial relationships are less likely to form as viewers do not feel connected to the creators, as they are only viewing the video because of the idea (The Colin and Samir Show, 2020). Regardless, some idea-based content creators will share about their lives. An example of this would be an offhanded comment about likes or dislikes. The background of videos will also encourage parasocial relationship formation as it divulges information about the YouTuber's life. Small glimpses into the lives of idea-based creators cause viewers to feel some sort of connection (The Colin and Samir Show, 2020).

Conversely, relationship-based YouTubers create content centered around themselves and their personality (The Colin and Samir Show, 2020). Therefore, viewers are able to learn about YouTuber's lives more easily and form their own opinions and thoughts (The Colin and Samir Show, 2020; Traynor, 2020). Commonly relationship-based YouTubers are vloggers (The Colin and Samir Show, 2020). In these vlogs, YouTubers display their everyday lives by simulating a feeling of the viewer experiencing an entire day in one video (The Colin and Samir Show, 2020). The format allows viewers to easily form parasocial relationships with these vloggers as they are consistently viewing a person's routine, causing them to make it their own (Horton and Wohl, 1956, The Colin and Samir Show, 2020; Burgess and Green, 2009). The audience becomes dependent on the YouTuber as they feel the videos are part of their own lives, if a vlogger does not post a video viewers feel as though they are missing out on something (The Colin and Samir Show, 2020). Relationship-based YouTubers will feel the weight of their career more intensely as their brand is based on their own personality (The Colin and Samir Show, 2020). If a vlogger is feeling depressed or mentally unwell, it will affect their videos and potentially cause them to lose subscribers. These vloggers can form deep self-loathing as they over analyze their personality to

ensure their videos are getting sufficient views and their channel continues to grow (The Colin and Samir Show, 2020).

Study layout

Excursus on measuring parasocial relationships

Most commonly, PSR formation is studied using the parasocial process that was developed by Rubin, Perse, and Powell in their work ‘Loneliness, Parasocial Interaction, and Local Television News Viewing’ (Rubin et al.). This was mainly used to measure the reason for television viewing, habitual viewing, loneliness, and social involvement with a television show (Rubin et al., 1985; Rhil and Wegener, 2017). However, this design is more suited to studying parasocial relationships based on friendship rather than interactions between viewer and performer (Dibble et al., 2016; Hartmann and Goldhoorn, 2011; Rhil and Wegener, 2017). Therefore, the study outlined in Thelwall et al.’s work titled ‘I’m nervous about sharing this secret with you: Youtube influencers generate strong parasocial interactions by discussing personal issues’ is better suited for this work (2022). In their study, they found that the pronoun ‘you’ and iterations of it in YouTube comments, are reliable indicators for PSR formation in videos (Rhil and Wegener, 2017; Thelwall et al., 2022). This is because viewers must have an account to comment, meaning they are invested in the content the YouTuber is making. You, consequently, means the commenter is directly addressing the content creator and thus gives evidence of their parasocial relationship (Rhil and Wegener, 2017; Thelwall et al., 2022).

As this present study is interested in parasocial relationship formation between viewers and YouTube celebrities, it uses an adapted version of Thelwall et al.’s pronoun ‘you’ study (2022).

Aims of study

Based on the trajectory of earlier research, this study aims to look at whether PSR formation is developed more strongly in relationship-based or idea-based content, as content type has only been a subsequent variable in previous work. In doing so, this work helps to further the knowledge around PSR formation online and has implications in understanding the type of content that best aids in this development. YouTube celebrities engage in similar roles of talk show hosts, comedians, and soap opera celebrities causing them to be exhibits of parasocial relationship development (Chen, 2016, Dibble et al., 2016, Horton and Whol, 2006). Content

type itself plays a role in the intensity of the parasocial development (Lou and Kim, 2019). By comparing the frequency of occurrences of the pronoun ‘you’ variants in idea and relationship-based content, conclusions can be reached about which causes a higher degree of PSR formation.

The problems outlined above can be centralized into the main research question:

- a. Will relationship-based or idea-based content have higher PSR potential based on higher occurrences of comments containing variants of the pronoun ‘you’?

Thus, the hypotheses are as follows:

- a. Null hypothesis: There is no difference in the occurrence of pronoun ‘you’ variants for relationship and idea-based videos.
- b. Alternative hypothesis: There is a difference in the occurrence of the pronoun ‘you’ variants between relationship and idea-based videos

Because content type as a variable for PSR formation has not yet been specifically studied, an exploratory yet standardized approach was taken. While a more in-depth study is needed, this work will give a brief glimpse and hopefully urge other researchers to explore how content type affects PSR formation. In order to do justice to the explanatory nature of this work, the adapted methodology of Thelwall et al.’s pronoun ‘you’ study (2022) has been chosen. As the work is easily imitated at a low cost and focuses on the comments and consequently the PSR formation for specific videos (Thelwall et al., 2022).

Methods

To adequately address the research question, an exploratory quantitative study design was chosen. Existing research establishes that comments are acceptable indicators of PSR formation (Thelwall et al., 2022; Rhil and Wegener, 2017), allowing this study to move forward using the same methodology. Next, YouTube celebrities were chosen to represent relationship-based and idea-based content. YouTubers Emma Chamberlain, to represent relationship-based creators, and YesTheory (the members being Thomas Brag, Ammar Kandil, Matt Dahlia, and Derin Emre), to represent idea-based creators, were chosen. These content creators were chosen as they are fairly similar in subscribers, Chamberlain having 12 million and YesTheory having 8.82 million in 2024. Although there is a 3.18 million difference in subscribers, this difference is relatively insignificant as this study focuses on the content type and comments of the videos and not the

popularity of the YouTubers. These YouTube celebrities both started creating YouTube content around the same time, as Chamberlain started making content in 2017 and YesTheory in 2015. These two YouTubers are seen as archetypes that represent the two main categories of content on YouTube. Collin and Semier agree as they have had both creators on their podcast to discuss the two different types of content they represent. Emma Chamberlain represents relationship-based content as the videos made have a vlog-style-format that causes a higher amount of self-disclosure. Some of the videos made by Chamberlain are topic focused however the style of communication and filming of the video maintain a relationship-based content feel. However, YesTheory videos are solely focused on topics, therefore, their content is heavily idea-based centered. YesTheory does incorporate some vlog-style content, however the majority of their videos have lower amounts of self-disclosure and remain heavily focused on one topic or idea.

Once the content creators were chosen, the top ten viewed videos as of April 2024 were selected and assigned numbers. The top ten videos were selected as it was assumed the most viewed videos would have the most comments, offering a larger sample size to be studied. A random number generator was used to select three videos from each of the YouTubers. The three videos ordered from most to least viewed that were selected for Chamberlain are; ‘DRESSING UP AS EACHOTHER ft Dolan Twins & James Charles’, ‘VEGETARIAN TRIES MEAT FOR THE FIRST TIME’, and ‘MY HAIR IS RUINED’. The three videos ordered from most to least viewed that were selected for YesTheory are; ‘ABANDONED city in America with NO LAWS’, ‘Traveling to the Least Visited Country in the World’, and ‘ABANDONED 5-STAR Prison Pablo Escobar Built For Himself (Revealed by Ex-Drug Dealer)’. Python code was written to harvest the YouTube comments from each of the videos, 14 variables were provided using this code. However, only four variables, ‘id’, ‘text’, ‘like count’, and ‘author’ were kept. The other variables were discarded for two main reasons, either incomplete data or the information gathered was not relevant to the study. One example of a non-relevant variable is ‘author thumbnail’, as this does not pertain to the content of the comment which is the main focus of the study. These comments were harvested over a three day period, April 3, 2024 to April 5, 2024 to minimize inconsistencies in the comment quantity as people continually comment on YouTube videos.

The comments were then analyzed using excel commands. Each comment was analyzed for variants of the pronoun ‘you’-- you, you’ve, you’re, your, yourself, and yourselves. Once each

video's comments were analyzed, the data from the most viewed video of each YouTuber was combined into a single excel sheet. This was done for the second and third viewed videos as well. These files were then uploaded into SPSS, where a two tailed t-test was conducted, with a 95% confidence interval for the three sets of data categorized by view amount.

Sample

The total number of comments collected was 196,469 with the most viewed videos containing 85,721 comments, the second most viewed videos containing 73,537, and the least viewed videos containing 37,211. Expectedly, the number of comments and views have a directly negative relationship.

Results

Most viewed videos and parasocial relationship formation

Evaluation of the 'you' variant data and the p-value ($M = -0.107$, $SD = 0.488$, $T\text{-test} = -34.275$, $P\text{-value} = <0.001$) indicates that there is a significant difference between the occurrences of 'you' in the comments between the two most viewed videos; 'DRESSING UP AS EACHOTHER ft Dolan Twins & James Charles' and 'ABANDONED city in America with NO LAWS'. The confidence score ($\text{Lower} = -0.113$, $\text{Upper} = -0.101$) indicates that the occurrences of 'you' in the comments will always be less for the idea-based (YesTheory) video than for the relationship-based (Chamberlain) video.

Evaluation of the 'you've' variant data and the p-value ($M = -0.002$, $SD = 0.047$, $T\text{-test} = -6.265$, $P\text{-value} = <0.001$) indicates that there is a significant difference between the occurrences of 'you've' in the comments between the two most viewed videos. The confidence score ($\text{Lower} = -0.002$, $\text{Upper} = -0.001$) indicates that the occurrences of 'you' in the comments will always be less for the idea-based video than for the relationship-based video.

Evaluation of the 'you're' variant data and the p-value ($M = -0.008$, $SD = 0.111$, $T\text{-test} = -11.695$, $P\text{-value} = <0.001$) indicates that there is a significant difference between the occurrences of 'you're' in the comments between the two most viewed videos. The confidence score ($\text{Lower} = -0.010$, $\text{Upper} = -0.007$) indicates that the occurrences of 'you're' in the comments will always be less for the idea-based video than for the relationship-based video.

Evaluation of the 'your' variant data and the p-value ($M = -.033$, $SD = 0.268$, $T\text{-test} = -18.971$, $P\text{-value} = <0.001$) indicates that there is a significant difference between the occurrences of 'your' in the comments between the two most viewed videos. The confidence score (Lower = -0.036 , Upper = -0.029) indicates that the occurrences of 'your' in the comments will always be less for the idea-based video than for the relationship-based video.

Evaluation of the 'yourself' variant data and the p-value ($M = -0.003$, $SD = 0.069$, $T\text{-test} = -7.936$, $P\text{-value} = <0.001$) indicates that there is a significant difference between the occurrences of 'yourselves' in the comments between the two most viewed videos. The confidence score (Lower = -0.004 , Upper = -0.003) indicates that the occurrences of 'yourself' in the comments will always be less for the idea-based video than for the relationship-based video.

Evaluation of the 'yourselves' variant data and the p-value ($M = -0.001$, $SD = 0.025$, $T\text{-test} = -3.357$, $P\text{-value} = <0.001$) indicates that there is a significant difference between the occurrences of 'yourselves' in the comments between the two most viewed videos. The confidence score (Lower = -0.001 , Upper = 0.000) indicates that the occurrences of 'yourselves' in the comments will always be less for the idea-based video than for the relationship-based video.

Therefore, for all the variants of the pronoun 'you', the null hypothesis, that there is no difference between the occurrences of 'you' pronouns in relationship and idea-based videos, can be rejected. The most significant difference occurred with the pronoun 'you' ($T\text{-test} = -34.275$), and the least difference was in the pronoun variant 'yourselves' ($T\text{-test} = -3.357$). This is consistent with colloquial speech as 'you' is more accessible than 'yourselves'.

Second most viewed videos and parasocial relationship formation

Evaluation of the 'you' variant data and the p-value ($M = -0.043$, $SD = 0.569$, $T\text{-test} = -13.685$, $P\text{-value} = <0.001$) indicates that there is a significant difference between the occurrences of 'you' in the comments between the second most viewed videos; 'VEGETARIAN TRIES MEAT FOR THE FIRST TIME' and 'Traveling to the Least Visited Country in the World'. The confidence score (Lower = -0.049 , Upper = -0.037) indicates that the occurrences of 'you' in the comments will always be less for the idea-based (YesTheory) video than for the relationship-based (Chamberlain) video.

Evaluation of the 'you're' variant data and the p-value ($M = -0.001$, $SD = 0.113$, $T\text{-test} = -2.365$, $P\text{-value} = 0.018$) indicates that there is a significant difference between the occurrences of

'you're' in the comments between the second most viewed videos. The confidence score (Lower= -0.003, Upper= -0.000) indicates that the occurrences of 'you're' in the comments will always be less for the idea-based video than for the relationship-based video.

Evaluation of the 'your' variant data and the p-value (M= -0.009, SD= 0.299, T-test= -5.511, P-value= <0.001) indicates that there is a significant difference between the occurrences of 'your' in the comments between the second most viewed videos. The confidence score (Lower= -0.012, Upper= -0.006) indicates that the occurrences of 'your' in the comments will always be less for the idea-based video than for the relationship-based video.

Evaluation of the 'you've' variant data and the p-value (M= -0.001, SD= 0.59, T-test= -1.701, P-value= 0.089) indicates that there is a no significant difference between the occurrences of 'you've' in the comments between the second most viewed videos. The results are similar for the 'yourself' variant data (M= 0.000, SD= 0.017, T-test= -0.967, P-value= 0.334) and 'yourselves' data (M= 0.000, SD= 0.017, T-test= -1.00, P-value= 0.317). Thus, the variants 'yourselves' and 'yourself' can be thrown out due to their insignificant mean of 0.000.

The null hypothesis, there is no difference between the occurrences of 'you' pronouns in relationship and idea-based videos, is rejected for the pronoun 'you' variants; 'you', 'you're', and 'your'. Whereas, we fail to reject the null hypothesis for the pronoun 'you' variant 'you've'. Interestingly, the 'you' variant has the most significant difference (T-test= -13.685), and the least difference was in the pronoun variant 'you're' (T-test= -2.365). The significance of the pronoun variant 'you' is consistent between the most viewed and second most viewed videos.

Third most viewed videos and parasocial relationship formation

Evaluation of the 'you' variant data and the p-value (M= 0.001, SD= 0.568, T-test= 0.192, P-value= 0.847) indicates that there is no significant difference between the occurrences of 'you' in the comments between the two least viewed videos; 'MY HAIR IS RUINED' and 'ABANDONED 5-STAR Prison Pablo Escobar Built For Himself (Revealed by Ex-Drug Dealer)'. This is similar to findings for the 'you've' variant (M= 0.000, SD= 0.041, T-test= -0.333, P-value= 0.739) and 'yourselves' variant (M= 0.000, SD= 0.014, T-test= -1.000, P-value= 0.317). However, the variants 'you' and 'yourselves' can be thrown out as they have insignificant means of 0.000. It is important to note that the mean of the 'you' variant (0.001) is close to being insignificant, which may be causing the insignificant p-value (0.847).

Evaluation of the 'you're' variant data and the p-value ($M = -0.003$, $SD = 0.108$, $T\text{-test} = -2.033$, $P\text{-value} = 0.042$) indicates that there is a significant difference between the occurrences of 'you're' in the comments between the third most viewed videos. The confidence score ($\text{Lower} = -0.004$, $\text{Upper} = 0.000$) indicates that the occurrences of 'you're' in the comments will always be less for the idea-based video than for the relationship-based video.

Evaluation of the 'your' variant data and the p-value ($M = 0.032$, $SD = 0.344$, $T\text{-test} = 6.804$, $P\text{-value} < 0.001$) indicates that there is a significant difference between the occurrences of 'your' in the comments between the third most viewed videos. The confidence score ($\text{Lower} = 0.023$, $\text{Upper} = 0.041$) indicates that the occurrences of 'your' in the comments will always be less for the idea-based video than for the relationship-based video.

Fail to reject: you, you've, yourselves

Evaluation of the 'yourself' variant data and the p-value ($M = -0.002$, $SD = 0.74$, $T\text{-test} = -2.415$, $P\text{-value} = 0.016$) indicates that there is a significant difference between the occurrences of 'yourself' in the comments between the third most viewed videos. The confidence score ($\text{Lower} = -0.004$, $\text{Upper} = 0.000$) indicates that the occurrences of 'yourself' in the comments will always be less for the idea-based video than for the relationship-based video.

The null hypothesis, there is no difference between the occurrences of 'you' pronouns in relationship and idea-based videos, is rejected for the pronoun 'you' variants; 'you're', 'your', and 'yourself'. Whereas we fail to reject the null hypothesis for the pronoun 'you' variant 'you'. These findings are not consistent with the previous results. Suggesting that as the amount of comments decreases, so does the reliability of the data. Therefore, the third most viewed video data is not weighed as significantly in the conclusion.

Conclusion and discussion of results

This study contributes to PSR literature as it distinguishes the difference between PSR formulation for the two distinct types of content on YouTube. The findings also validate the idea that PSR is present and developed through the social media platform YouTube (Chen, 2016, Dibble et al., 2016; Horton and Whol, 1956).

Like in previous studies (Chen, 2016, Thelwall et al., 2022; Rhil and Wegener, 2017; Lou and Kim, 2019), it is concluded that relationship-based videos consistently produce higher amounts of PSR than idea-based videos, according to the occurrence of 'you' pronoun variants in

comments. Although relationship-based videos produce a higher parasocial relationship, it was found that PSR is still formed through idea-based videos only to a lesser degree. These results are consistent with Lou and Kim's findings (2019) that entertaining rather than informational videos are more highly correlated with PSR formation with YouTubers.

Further implications of this study and the importance of PSR development revolve around two interconnected points— PSR leads to increased trust in YouTubers which causes intensified purchasing intentions (Lou and Kim, 2019; Tuncer and Kartal, 2023). As PSR is cultivated, the trust in the content creator increases, this trust can be translated into purchasing intention (Reinikainen et al., 2020; Lou and Kim, 2019; Tuncer and Kartal, 2023). Therefore, viewers are more likely to buy a product endorsed by a YouTuber with whom they have an intense PSR (Reinikainen et al., 2020; Lou and Kim, 2019).

This is most important for younger viewers as children watching YouTubers are also forming PSR (de Berail and Bungener, 2022). These children are less likely to be aware of the parasocial phenomenon occurring, meaning they will blindly trust content creators' opinions and endorsements (de Berail and Bungener, 2022; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Lou and Kim, 2019; Tuncer and Kartal, 2023). As age decreases, the PSR strength increases (de Berail and Bungener, 2022). It is hypothesized that this is due to a transitional period younger children experience where they discover who they are and what their identity is, thus, as they watch their favorite YouTubers, they identify with them and form their personality and self around the content creator (de Berail and Bungener, 2022). Higher PSR coupled with less education of the phenomenon means it is imperative that this work is further discussed to educate children and prevent them from the potentially malicious buying power content creators hold.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is that it is inconclusive if commenting is a reliable indicator of strong PSR formation. Although studies use comment analysis to test hypotheses, it is always coupled with quantitative survey data (Thelwall et al., 2022; Rhil and Wegener, 2017). A study found that there is a weak positive relationship between commenting on videos and PSR strength (Rihl and Wegener, 2019). Another study found that commenting and liking a video led to a 0.6 increase in stronger PSR (Munnukka et al., 2019). Thelwall et al.'s study was the first to conduct their research analyzing only comments, it was found that comments can be a higher indicator of

PSR development (2022). As this was the first study to use this method, it is inconclusive if the adapted version of Thelwall et al.'s pronoun 'you' study is reliable (2022). Therefore, it is recommended that this study be replicated using comments in addition to survey data indicating viewers PSR levels, as seen in previous studies (Thelwall et al., 2022; Rhil and Wegener, 2017).

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Appendix

This study was orally presented on May 18, 2024 at the Seattle Pacific Honors Symposium. The study was included in a panel titled, *Eating the internet: Mass Consumption of Media, Data, and Energy*. Consumption was the main feature of this panel, just as it is in our modern culture, especially in regard to media content. The panel discussed consumption from the perspectives of amount consumed, parasocial relationships with creators, economic interests, and resource usage. By exploring these ideas, the panel aimed to make the audience more aware of daily consumption. The oral speech of the study is as follows:

Through my honors project, I aimed to contribute a richer understanding of parasocial relationship formation, specifically on YouTube by drawing on previous literature and conducting an exploratory quantitative study of the degree to which video content type influences parasocial relationship formation.

First, let's dissect what a parasocial relationship is. Parasocial relationships were first studied by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl, their work mainly focused on parasocial interaction. Their study titled, 'Mass Communication and Parasocial Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance' hypothesized that the viewing experience of television broadcasts are similar to face-to-face interactions. Viewers feel they are being addressed personally by television celebrities, as though they are having a one-on-one conversation. Although the viewer perceives it to be mutual, this interaction is one-sided, and is controlled by the performer. Thus, the interaction remains parasocial as the performer is not able to reciprocate communication. An example of this would be viewers directly addressing the television as they watch a broadcast, unphased by the inability of the performer to communicate back.

One important distinction overlooked by Horton and Wohl and developed by subsequent scholarship is the distinction between parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships.

Parasocial relationships are now being described as the result of multiple parasocial interactions; this phenomenon remains past the initial interaction, forming parasocial relationships. While interaction is limited to a single act, parasocial relationships will be developed through repetitive interaction, while still remaining one-sided; this causes a closer bond to be created. An example of this would be repetitive viewing of a weekly broadcast where the host directly addresses the viewers. The viewers start to perceive the host as a friend, causing them to think about the host when the show is not being aired. The relationship is solidified as the viewer maintains an emotional connection to the host between periods of interaction. Thus, it is imperative that the celebrity is consistently viewed in order to create a feeling of intimacy that is further developed through a rapport of stories and experiences.

When defined as the result of repetitive parasocial interactions, reoccurring media platforms become breeding grounds for parasocial relationships to develop. During the development of the relationship, viewers will designate different roles for celebrities to play in their daily lives; thus, viewers may perceive media figures as friends, a part of their identity, or as a role model. Media platforms encourage viewers to feel as though they are a part of a community as well as reinforce a false idea that viewers may meet their favorite celebrity; both attributes are important components to forming parasocial relationships.

Studies that look at the parasocial relationship formation on video platforms, specifically YouTube, are sparse. Chen studied the construction of self, self-representation, and the construction of relationships between Taiwanese YouTubers and viewers. Chen concluded that YouTubers, like television actors, enlist and form parasocial relationships. Thus, YouTube can be recognized as a platform where viewers “parasocially develop social relations”. Compared to other social media platforms, YouTube is likely the most conducive to developing parasocial relationships due to the structure of the platform; as it creates a disconnect between content creators and viewers while maintaining regularly scheduled videos that cause parasocial interactions, forming stronger parasocial relationships.

There are two broad types of content that have emerged with the popularization of YouTube. Although not established in scholarly literature, these terms are used, promoted, and coined by Collin and Semier. Collin and Semier are, themselves, YouTubers and podcasters who dissect the trajectory of YouTubers’ careers and offer advice on how to grow viewership and

increase popularity. According to Collin and Semier, YouTubers are either relationship-based or idea-based content creators.

An idea-based YouTuber is someone whose content is centered on an idea or topic. One example Semier gives of a YouTube video like this is titled “I jumped in a pool of sharks”. This idea is interesting, and a viewer would be willing to watch the video regardless of who the creator was. Thus, viewers are not attached to the creator, but merely the idea or topic of the video. Parasocial relationships are less likely to form as viewers do not feel connected to the creators, as they are only viewing the video because of the idea. Regardless, some idea-based content creators will share about their lives. An example of this would be an offhanded comment about likes or dislikes. The background of videos will also encourage parasocial relationship formation as it divulges information about the YouTuber’s life. Small glimpses into the lives of idea-based creators may cause viewers to feel some sort of connection.

Conversely, relationship-based YouTubers create content centered around themselves and their personality. Therefore, viewers are able to learn about YouTuber’s lives more easily and form their own opinions and thoughts. Commonly relationship-based YouTubers are vloggers. In these vlogs, YouTubers display their everyday lives by simulating a feeling of the viewer experiencing an entire day in one video. The format allows viewers to easily form parasocial relationships with these vloggers as they are consistently viewing a person's routine, causing them to make it their own. The audience becomes dependent on the YouTuber as they feel the videos are part of their own lives, if a vlogger does not post a video viewers feel as though they are missing out on something. Relationship-based YouTubers will feel the weight of their career more intensely as their brand is based on their own personality. If a vlogger is feeling depressed or mentally unwell, it will affect their videos and potentially cause them to lose subscribers. These vloggers can form deep self-loathing as they over analyze their personality to ensure their videos are getting sufficient views and their channel continues to grow

Due to the time limit of this presentation, I am unable to discuss the various variables that contribute to parasocial formation specifically on YouTube. A brief list of some of these variables are camera angle, quality of video, repetitive viewing, feeling of intimacy, and self disclosure. These variables impacted the methodology of the study, where the aim was to look at whether PSR formation, or parasocial relationship formation, is developed more strongly in relationship-based or idea-based content. Content type itself plays a role in the intensity of the

parasocial development. By comparing the frequency of occurrences of the pronoun 'you' variants in idea and relationship-based content, conclusions can be reached about which causes a higher degree of PSR formation. The null hypothesis is: There is no difference in the occurrence of pronoun 'you' variants for relationship and idea-based videos. The alternative hypothesis is: there is a difference in the occurrence of the pronoun 'you' variant between relationship and idea-based videos.

In order to adequately address the research question and hypotheses, an exploratory quantitative study design was chosen. Existing research establishes that comments are acceptable indicators of PSR formation, allowing this study to move forward using the same methodology. Next, YouTube celebrities were chosen to represent relationship-based and idea-based content. YouTuber Emma Chamberlain was chosen to represent relationship-based creators, and YesTheory (the members being Thomas Brag, Ammar Kandil, Matt Dahlia, and Derin Emre) was chosen to represent idea-based creators. These content creators were chosen as they are fairly similar in subscribers, Chamberlain having 12 million and YesTheory having 8.82 million in 2024. Although there is a 3.18 million difference in subscribers, this difference is relatively insignificant as this study focuses on the content type and comments of the videos and not the popularity of the YouTubers. These YouTube celebrities both started creating YouTube content around the same time, as Chamberlain started making content in 2017 and YesTheory in 2015. These two YouTubers are seen as archetypes that represent the two main categories of content on YouTube. Collin and Semier agree as they have had both creators on their podcast to discuss the two different types of content they represent. Emma Chamberlain represents relationship-based content as the videos made have a vlog-style-format that causes a higher amount of self-disclosure. Some of the videos made by Chamberlain are topic focused however the style of communication and filming of the video maintain a relationship-based feel. However, YesTheory videos are solely focused on topics, therefore, their content is heavily idea-based centered. YesTheory does incorporate some vlog-style content, however the majority of their videos have lower amounts of self-disclosure and remain heavily focused on one topic or idea.

Once the content creators were chosen, the top ten viewed videos as of April 2024 were selected and assigned numbers. The top ten videos were selected as it was assumed the most viewed videos would have the most comments, offering a larger sample size to be studied. A random number generator was used to select three videos from each of the YouTubers. The three

videos ordered from most to least viewed that were selected for Chamberlain are; ‘DRESSING UP AS EACHOTHER ft Dolan Twins & James Charles’, ‘VEGETARIAN TRIES MEAT FOR THE FIRST TIME’, and ‘MY HAIR IS RUINED’. The three videos ordered from most to least viewed that were selected for YesTeory are; ‘ABANDONED city in America with NO LAWS’, ‘Traveling to the Least Visited Country in the World’, and ‘ABANDONED 5-STAR Prison Pablo Escobar Built For Himself (Revealed by Ex-Drug Dealer)’. Python code was written to harvest the YouTube comments from each of the videos, four variables, ‘id’, ‘text’, ‘like count’, and ‘author’ were used. These comments were harvested over a three day period, April 3, 2024 to April 5, 2024 to minimize inconsistencies in the comment quantity as people continually comment on YouTube videos.

The comments were then analyzed using excel commands. Each comment was analyzed for variants of the pronoun ‘you’-- you, you’ve, you’re, your, yourself, and yourselves. The data was then uploaded into SPSS, where a two tailed t-test was conducted, with a 95% confidence interval for the three sets of data categorized by view amount.

Due to the time limit, I will not be dissecting all the results from the study. However, we will look at the findings from the most viewed videos and the PSR formation. It was concluded that for all the variants of the pronoun ‘you’, the null hypothesis, that there is no difference between the occurrences of ‘you’ pronouns in relationship and idea-based videos, can be rejected. The most significant difference occurred with the pronoun ‘you’ (T-test= -34.275), and the least difference was in the pronoun variant ‘yourselves’ (T-test= -3.357). This is consistent with colloquial speech as ‘you’ is more accessible than ‘yourselves’. Moreover, the confidence score (Lower= -0.113, Upper= -0.101) indicates that the occurrences of ‘you’ in the comments will always be less for idea-based videos than for relationship-based video. Confidence scores in the following ‘you’ variants echoed these results. Proving that relationship-based videos will consistently have a higher occurrence of ‘you’ variants meaning PSR is more strongly formed through relationship-based videos. It is important to note however, that PSR was still formed through idea-based videos, meaning this content is still conducive to PSR formation, just to a lesser degree.

This study contributes to PSR literature as it distinguishes the difference between PSR formulation for the two distinct types of content on YouTube. The findings also validate the idea that PSR is present and developed through the social media platform YouTube.

Like in previous studies, it is concluded that relationship-based videos consistently produce higher amounts of PSR than idea-based videos, according to the occurrence of 'you' pronoun variants in comments. These results are consistent with Lou and Kim's findings that entertaining rather than informational videos are more highly correlated with PSR formation on YouTube.

Further implications of this study and the importance of PSR development revolve around two interconnected points— PSR leads to increased trust in YouTubers which causes intensified purchasing intentions. As PSR is cultivated, the trust in the content creator increases, this trust can be translated into purchasing intention. Therefore, viewers are more likely to buy a product endorsed by a YouTuber with whom they have an intense PSR.

This is most important for younger viewers as children watching YouTube are also forming PSR. These children are less likely to be aware of the parasocial phenomenon occurring, meaning they will blindly trust content creators' opinions and endorsements. As age decreases, the PSR strength increases. It is hypothesized that this is due to a transitional period younger children experience where they discover who they are and what their identity is, thus, as they watch their favorite YouTubers, they identify with them and form their personality and self around the content creator. Higher PSR coupled with less education of the phenomenon means it is imperative that this work is further discussed to educate children and prevent them from the potentially malicious buying power content creators hold.