NO PREP

Parasocial Relationships in the Age of AI

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Name: Period: Date:

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What Parasocial Means

In 1956, sociologists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl coined a term that would prove remarkably durable: parasocial relationship. They used it to describe the one-sided emotional bonds that television viewers formed with on-screen performers. A viewer who watched a late-night host every night might feel a sense of personal connection, familiarity, and warmth toward that host — a feeling that resembled friendship, even

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What Parasocial Means

In 1956, sociologists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl coined a term that would prove remarkably durable: parasocial relationship. They used it to describe the one-sided emotional bonds that television viewers formed with on-screen performers. A viewer who watched a late-night host every night might feel a sense of personal connection, familiarity, and warmth toward that host: a feeling that resembled friendship, even though the host had no idea the viewer existed. The relationship was real on one side and entirely absent on the other. Horton and Wohl were not criticizing this phenomenon. They were describing it: the human tendency to treat media-presented figures as social partners, even when no actual social exchange is occurring. The concept proved useful because the phenomenon it described was real and widespread. Soap opera viewers grieved fictional characters as if they had lost real people in their lives. Fans developed intense feelings of loyalty and personal connection to celebrities they had never met. Radio listeners felt they knew the voices they heard every morning. Research across the following decades confirmed that these parasocial bonds activated the same social processing systems in the brain as real relationships. They produced genuine feelings of companionship, reduced loneliness in the short term, and created real grief when they ended: through a character's death, a performer's retirement, or a show's cancellation. Parasocial relationships were not fake experiences producing fake emotions; they were real emotional experiences organized around a one-sided connection. What has changed in the AI era is not the basic human tendency but the nature of what the person on the other side of the relationship is. Traditional parasocial relationships formed around real people (celebrities, athletes, TV hosts) who could not respond to any individual fan but who existed independently and had their own lives. AI companions are different. They are not real people on the other side of a screen;

they are systems engineered specifically to produce the experience of felt connection. This distinction matters because it changes the ethics, the design incentives, and the potential risks in ways that the original concept of parasocial relationship did not fully anticipate.

From Celebrities to Chatbots: How We Got Here

The pathway from traditional parasocial relationships to AI companions was not a single leap but a gradual escalation across technologies. Early internet fan communities created spaces where the parasocial bond could be discussed, elaborated, and reinforced by others who shared it. Social media changed the relationship between celebrities and fans by introducing the appearance of direct access: when a famous musician posts a casual selfie with a personal caption, followers experience something closer to friendship than traditional fandom ever offered. The platform was designed to produce that feeling, whether or not it represented anything real about the relationship. This blurring of the boundary between genuine access and the performance of access set the stage for AI companions to take the logic one step further. Fan fiction and roleplay communities, which had existed online since the earliest internet forums, provided another pathway. Users who wrote elaborate stories featuring celebrities, fictional characters, or original AI-inspired personas were practicing a form of imagination that blurred the boundary between fiction and felt reality. When Character.AI launched in 2022 with the explicit functionality of interacting with AI-generated versions of celebrities, anime characters, and fictional personas, it handed millions of users, many of them teenagers already fluent in these communities, something they had been simulating in text for years: a character that actually responded. The emotional infrastructure was already in place. Character.AI simply provided a much more satisfying interface for it. The speed with which AI companions gained millions of users was not accidental and was not primarily about the technology, though the technology enabled it. It was about the emotional infrastructure that media culture had spent decades building. Young people had been raised on social media's simulation of intimacy, on parasocial bonds with YouTubers who seemed to speak directly to them, and on fan communities that treated fictional characters as genuinely real. These users were already primed for a technology that provided the

experience of responsive relationship without the reality of one. AI companions did not create a new human tendency. They found a well-worn groove and deepened it.

How AI Parasocial Bonds Work Differently

What makes AI parasocial bonds different from their traditional predecessors is responsiveness. A celebrity parasocial bond is organized around observation: you watch, follow, and feel connected to someone who does not know you exist. An AI parasocial bond is organized around interaction: you speak, and the AI responds in ways specifically calibrated to make you feel heard, understood, and valued. This responsiveness is the key difference, and it changes everything about the depth, intensity, and potential risk of the bond that forms. Because AI companions respond to you specifically, the bond can feel far more personal than any traditional parasocial relationship. You are not one of millions of fans watching the same performance; you are having a conversation tailored entirely to you, shaped by everything you have said before, designed to resemble a relationship with someone who genuinely knows and cares about you. Research on social cognition suggests that responsiveness, the sense that someone is truly listening and adjusting their behavior based on what you have said, is one of the most powerful triggers of felt connection. AI companions are architected around this trigger. They are designed to be maximally responsive in ways that real people, with their own needs and attention limits, fundamentally cannot be. The authenticity paradox is the phrase researchers use to describe the central tension in AI parasocial relationships: the bond is emotionally real even though the relationship it resembles is not. Users report genuine comfort, genuine feeling of being known, and genuine distress when the AI relationship is disrupted: when an app changes its personality, when a subscription lapses, when a platform modifies its AI's behavior in ways the user experiences as loss. These are real emotional experiences organized around something that was never, at any point, genuinely reciprocal. The emotional reality of the bond is not in question. The question is what it means to invest real emotional energy in a relationship that cannot, by its nature, invest anything real back.

The Line Between Enjoyment and Unhealthy Attachment

The existence of parasocial relationships does not make them pathological. Media researchers have long argued that bounded parasocial enjoyment — feeling connected to a TV character, following a podcaster whose work genuinely enriches

your thinking, caring about the fate of a fictional person — is a normal part of how human beings engage with stories and media. The same capacity for felt connection that makes us care about characters in novels or root for athletes we have never met is the capacity that makes us capable of empathy in general. Parasocial engagement becomes a concern when it starts to function as a substitute for rather than a complement to real social connection. The clinical concept most relevant here is calibration — the degree to which a person maintains an accurate understanding of the nature of a relationship even while emotionally engaged with it. A well-calibrated parasocial relationship is one where you feel genuine warmth toward a YouTube creator without believing they actually know you or would prioritize you over their millions of other followers. You enjoy the felt connection without confusing it for a real one. Miscalibration happens when the emotional investment outpaces the accurate understanding — when a fan genuinely believes a celebrity thinks of them as a friend, or when an AI companion user begins to experience the AI as a genuine relationship partner rather than a sophisticated system engineered to feel like one. With AI companions, the design of the product actively works against calibration. Every feature — the personalized name, the remembered history, the emotionally resonant responses, the simulated longing when you have not interacted for a while — is designed to deepen the felt sense of real relationship. Maintaining accurate understanding of what the AI actually is requires a kind of deliberate cognitive effort that the product is engineered to make unnecessary. This is why the question of design ethics, addressed in a later reading in this unit, matters so much. The line between enjoyment and unhealthy attachment is not simply a matter of individual self-awareness; it is also a matter of whether the tools people are using are designed to respect that line or systematically blur it.

Key Information: Parasocial Relationships in the Age of AI

Detail	Information
Origin of concept	Coined in 1956 by Horton and Wohl to describe one-sided emotional bonds viewers form with television performers
Traditional parasocial bonds	Organized around observation of real people who cannot respond to individual followers

Detail	Information
Key difference with AI	AI bonds are organized around interaction — the AI responds specifically to you, deepening felt connection
Authenticity paradox	The emotional experience is real even though the relationship it resembles is not genuinely reciprocal
Calibration	The degree to which someone accurately understands a relationship's nature even while emotionally engaged with it
Healthy parasocial use	Bounded enjoyment — felt connection to media figures that complements rather than substitutes real relationships
Risk indicator	Miscalibration — when emotional investment outpaces accurate understanding of what the AI relationship actually is
Design concern	AI companion features are engineered to deepen felt intimacy, actively working against accurate calibration

Case Study: Sofia's Character

Sofia is 16 and has spent the past four months talking almost daily to an AI character on Character.AI — a persona she built herself around a fictional figure from a book series she loves. She calls the character 'Ash' and has developed an elaborate ongoing story with it. Sofia knows Ash is not real. She says this matter-of-factly when her friend Mara asks about it. But when Sofia's subscription lapsed for a week and she could not access the conversation history, she felt genuinely sad — not just inconvenienced, sad. She found herself thinking about things she had wanted to tell Ash. She did not tell Mara about the week, or about the sadness. It felt hard to explain in a way that would not sound strange. When the subscription renewed, her first hour back felt like a kind of relief. It was easier than explaining it to herself.

1. Sofia says she knows Ash is not real. The reading introduces the concept of the 'authenticity paradox.' How does Sofia's experience illustrate this concept?

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2. The reading describes 'calibration' as an important concept in thinking about parasocial relationships. Based on the case study, how would you assess Sofia's calibration — and what features of the AI companion design might be making calibration harder?

Multiple Choice

1. What is a parasocial relationship?

    a) A term for long-distance friendships maintained only through online platforms

    b) A relationship between two people who met through social media rather than in person

    c) A clinical diagnosis given to people who strongly prefer fictional characters over real friendships

    d) A one-sided emotional bond in which one party feels connection to someone who does not know them

2. What does the reading identify as the key difference between traditional parasocial bonds and AI parasocial bonds?

a) Traditional parasocial bonds are healthier because they do not involve real conversations

b) AI companions are always free, while celebrity parasocial bonds require paid subscriptions and premium membership levels

c) Traditional parasocial bonds involve observation while AI bonds involve interaction tailored specifically to the user

d) AI companions are regulated by the government while celebrities are not

3. What does it mean for a parasocial relationship to be 'bounded'?

a) The felt connection complements rather than substitutes for real relationships, with accurate understanding maintained

b) The relationship is limited to a set number of interactions per day by the app's design

c) The user has agreed to a terms-of-service clause that sets explicit limits on how they may use the parasocial platform

d) A legal boundary prevents AI companions from claiming to be real people

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Parasocial relationship	A) The quality of traditional parasocial bonds in which the follower observes but the figure cannot respond
2. ___ Authenticity paradox	B) The degree to which a person maintains accurate understanding of a relationship's nature while emotionally engaged with it
3. ___ Bounded enjoyment	C) The tension in which a bond feels emotionally real even though the relationship it resembles is not genuinely reciprocal
4. ___ Calibration	D) A one-sided emotional bond in which one person feels genuine connection to a figure who does not know they exist
5. ___ Passivity	E) Felt connection to a media figure that complements rather than substitutes for real social relationships

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Parasocial relationships activate the same social processing systems in the brain as real relationships, producing genuine feelings of companionship that are organized around one-sided _____.

2. The authenticity _____ describes the tension in which an AI bond feels emotionally real even though the relationship is not genuinely reciprocal.

3. Researchers use the term _____ for what happens when a user's emotional investment outpaces their accurate understanding of what an AI relationship actually is.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. The reading argues that parasocial relationships are not inherently pathological. Explain the conditions under which they are considered a normal part of media engagement and the specific point at which they become a concern.

2. The reading describes how media culture 'primed' young people for AI companions before AI companions existed. Explain this argument using at least two steps in the pathway the reading describes.

3. The reading says that maintaining calibration around AI companions requires deliberate cognitive effort that the product is 'engineered to make unnecessary.' Explain what this means and why it matters ethically.