CHAPTER

11 How Parasocial Relationships Affect Our Self-Concepts 🔓

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Abstract

The chapter surveys the effects of parasocial relationships (PSRs; one-sided relationships with media figures, including celebrities and fictional characters) on individuals' self-concept, self-esteem, and self-discrepancies. The chapter begins by examining the effects of PSRs on self-esteem and body esteem. After reviewing the literature in these areas, the chapter explores how people use self-expanding properties of PSRs to regulate affect and other unpleasant states. Finally, it explores some potential areas for future research. Special attention is given to the effects of PSRs on body image. The chapter reviews evidence of both problematic and protective consequences of PSRs for media users' mental health and psychological well-being.

Keywords: self-esteem, body-esteem, self-concept, assimilation effect, contrast effect

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Introduction

People love celebrities, and the modern world provides ample opportunity to intertwine our lives with theirs. Whereas once people had to wait for monthly magazines to give them carefully curated glimpses into the lives of their favorite celebrities, now people can get that information quickly, frequently, and from many sources. People follow celebrities on Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and various other social media platforms. They can see daily pictures and stories, as well as get intimate insights into celebrities' personal lives. In addition, people not only can read about their favorite characters in books but also can read unlimited amounts of fan fiction, play video games in which they inhabit the worlds (and avatars) of their favorite characters, and even visit theme parks dedicated to re-creating the worlds of their favorite characters. The ubiquitousness of celebrities and popular fictional characters in our society begs the question: How does this constant contact affect how people think and feel about themselves?

The current chapter examines the effects of parasocial relationships (PSRs), or one-sided relationships with media figures, including celebrities and fictional characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956), on the self. We begin by examining the effects of PSRs on self-esteem and body esteem. After reviewing the literature in these areas, we explore ↳ how people use self-expanding properties of PSRs to regulate affect and other unpleasant states. Finally, we explore some potential areas for future research.

The Effects of Parasocial Relationships on the Self

Parasocial Relationships and Self-Esteem

In this section, we review five ways that PSRs may affect self-esteem. Specifically, we examine how PSRs may increase self-esteem by (1) allowing people to assimilate the characteristics of the parasocial partner; (2) increasing self-efficacy; (3) fostering a sense of belonging; (4) boosting perceived relational value; and (5) providing people with a link to others who share their PSR. Whereas some of the research reviewed here experimentally examined the effects of PSRs on self-esteem, most of the research is less direct. Some does not directly assess PSRs but related constructs; some does not directly assess self-esteem but related constructs; and some relies on correlations instead of experiments. We review all of this work because, together, we believe that it presents a compelling story of PSRs affecting self-esteem.

Assimilation of Positive Attributes.

At first glance, the increased access to celebrities brought about in the modern world seems like a terrible self-esteem and mood-destroying new reality. After all, most celebrities are physically attractive people with wealth and luxury; they share pictures of themselves looking perfect and enjoying the high life with equally perfect romantic partners. One could easily hypothesize that exposing oneself—all day, every day—to the lives of celebrities would inevitably be bad for our self-perceptions. It is a wonder that people do not scroll through Instagram in the fetal position.

Assuming that one would be devastated when reading about a celebrity who is more beautiful, successful, and happy than one contains an implicit assumption about the nature of social comparisons with the celebrities. It assumes that one looks at celebrities and compares, or contrasts, themselves to them. For example, seeing how beautiful Emma Watson is may make people feel bad about themselves because they compare their looks to her looks and thus feel badly about their physical appearance. Comparing oneself to a standard and then shifting self-perceptions away from the standard is called a contrast effect (Kahneman & Miller, 1986), and it often happens when one compares oneself to a stranger (Schwarz & Bless, 1992).

However, contrasting the self to others is only one way to react to a comparison standard. The other possible reaction is to assimilate the person to the self (e.g., Brown et al., 1992). For example, when a neighbor wins Olympic gold, if one compared their own physical abilities to that of their Olympic athlete neighbor, the individual would feel bad. However, in most cases, a layperson does not engage in a contrast effect with a local Olympic medalist. Instead, when their neighbor wins Olympic gold, people tend to feel proud and happy. This is why people brag about the accomplishments of those they are connected to. It is

why people feel good when someone they know does well. This is ↳ an assimilation effect; the other person's accomplishment has been assimilated to the self (Brown et al., 1992). The existence of both contrast and assimilation effects suggests that celebrities can potentially have opposite effects on thoughts and feelings about the self, depending on whether they are contrasted or assimilated to the self.

There are many things that determine whether contrast or assimilation occurs, but a key factor is the nature of the relationship to the target. Specifically, when the perceiver has a close, intimate relationship with the

target, assimilation effects are likely to occur (Aron et al., 1991). However, when the target is not close to the perceiver, contrast effects become more likely (Dijksterhaus et al., 1998). For example, when evaluating their performance on a novel task, people tend to assimilate the performance of a close friend but contrast the performance of an acquaintance (Pelham & Wachsmuth, 1995). This is likely because we link—or include—close others to the self (Aron et al., 1991). Therefore, we are more likely to include their traits in our self-concepts. In summary, there is converging evidence that relationship closeness moderates the tendency to assimilate versus contrast social comparison targets. This suggests that PSRs may strongly affect the impact that celebrities have on the self. Because PSRs tend to be cognitively represented like real close relationships (Gabriel et al., 2016), having a PSR with a celebrity should increase the likelihood of assimilation and decrease the likelihood of contrast.

Consistent with the idea that people assimilate the characteristics of celebrities with whom they have PSRs, research suggests PSRs can bring people closer to their ideal selves. In a series of studies, Derrick et al. (2008) examined the role of same-gender PSRs in the reduction of discrepancies between one's current and ideal self for people with low self-esteem. Individuals with low self-esteem tend to have large discrepancies between who they are and who they want to be (Baumeister, 1998). Indeed, a key component of high self-esteem is having small self-discrepancies—viewing the actual self as similar to one's ideals for oneself (Baumeister, 1998). Thus, low self-esteem individuals (unlike individuals with high self-esteem, who are already content with themselves) are motivated to find ways to increase their self-esteem, making them ideal participants for studies examining changes to self-discrepancies. Study 1 found that individuals with low self-esteem perceived similarity between their ideal self and their favorite celebrity. That similarity predicted how much they liked the celebrities. In other words, people who were low in self-esteem were attracted to celebrities who embodied the traits they wanted for themselves. Although Study 1 showed that people are drawn to celebrities who *could* help their self-esteem, the choice of an aspirational celebrity could still be detrimental if the celebrity posed a threat on their self-concept. Study 2 examined that possibility.

Study 2 had participants write for 6 minutes about a celebrity they admired or a control celebrity prior to measuring actual–ideal self-discrepancies. Results revealed that exposure to one's admired celebrity (as opposed to a control celebrity) led individuals with low self-esteem to see themselves as more similar to their ideal selves. In other words, PSRs led low self-esteem participants to view themselves more positively.

p. 255 Study 3 followed a ↳ similar procedure, but also included a condition in which participants were instructed to reflect on a social relationship with their romantic partner or close friend. Results showed that exposure to a favorite celebrity (but not a romantic partner or friend) led low self-esteem individuals to become more similar to their ideal selves. Further, this effect was mediated by assimilation of the celebrity to the self. Specifically, participants saw their actual self as more similar to their ideals for themselves and this was caused by seeing their self-concepts as more similar to the celebrities (i.e., assimilating them to the self). In other words, exposure to a favorite celebrity made people view themselves as similar to that celebrity, which in turn reduced actual–ideal self-discrepancies. Although they did not measure PSRs per se, these studies provide compelling evidence that PSRs with celebrities can increase self-esteem via assimilation of traits. In addition, these studies suggest they can be more effective than friends.

Assimilation of Self-Efficacy.

Another mechanism through which assimilation can enhance self-esteem is by increasing self-efficacy—confidence in one's ability to achieve one's goals (Bandura, 1977, 1997). The effect of PSRs on self-efficacy has been consistently demonstrated in the context of adoption of health behaviors. For instance, Phua (2014) found that PSRs with weight loss spokespeople were associated with higher self-efficacy regarding diet and exercise. Similarly, Y. Tian and Yoo (2015) found that PSRs with contestants on *The Biggest Loser* (a television show about extreme weight loss) were more likely to feel as though they were also in control of their weight loss and had high exercise self-efficacy. Rasmussen and Ewoldsen (2016) found that PSRs with Dr. Phil—the host of a talk show about mental health—promoted viewers' self-efficacy to seek mental health treatment for themselves and their children.

Similar effects of PSRs on self-efficacy were found in other contexts. For example, Hoewe and Sherrill (2019) found that PSRs with strong female political leader characters on shows like *Madam Secretary*, *The Good Wife*, and *Scandal* were associated with higher political self-efficacy. In summary, PSRs can make one feel confident in one's ability to achieve one's goals, which is a key component of self-esteem. Thus, self-efficacy is another possible route by which PSRs can increase self-esteem.

Belongingness.

In addition to increasing self-esteem by allowing people to assimilate the traits of celebrities, PSRs can also increase self-esteem by fostering a sense of belonging. Social rejection generally leads to decreases in self-esteem (Williams, 2009). However, PSRs can protect people from rejection-related decrements to self-esteem by bolstering belonging. In one of the first empirical examinations of this hypothesis, Derrick and colleagues (2009) found that for individuals with low self-esteem, exposure to their favorite television shows (which supposedly entail stronger PSRs with characters) provided the experience of belonging, which in turn mitigated social threats to their self-esteem (see also Chapter 10).

Knowles (Knowles, 2013; Knowles & Gardner, 2012) provided a more direct test of this by examining the effect of particular characters (rather than a television show). In a ↳ series of studies (Knowles, 2013; Knowles & Gardner, 2012), participants relived a rejection through rewriting about it and then wrote about a favorite television character or a control topic (i.e., favorite hobby, favorite friend, or favorite travel destination). Next, participants were assessed on a variety of negative outcomes that commonly occur in response to social rejection, including lowered self-esteem. Results of these studies suggested that exposure to a favorite television character buffered against decrements to cognitive performance (i.e., solving math problems), self-esteem, and mood. In addition, favorite characters bolstered individuals' feelings of belonging, which mediated the effect of television characters on mood. Following an actual social exclusion, individuals who were exposed to a favorite television character (as opposed to a control character) were less likely to inflate the meaningfulness of their ingroup (a self-protective cognitive response to rejection), suggesting their belonging needs were fulfilled by the favorite character. Similarly, Twenge et al. (2007) found that thinking about favorite celebrities alleviated aggressive behavioral tendencies that occur following social exclusion.

Of note, Twenge and colleagues (2007) found equally strong effects for celebrities and friends, whereas Derrick and colleagues (2008) found stronger effects for celebrities on the self. We suspect that this may be due to the populations examined. Twenge and colleagues (2007) did not separate participants based on self-esteem, whereas Derrick and colleagues (2008) only examined low esteem individuals. Individuals with low self-esteem have a difficult time trusting that their close friends and romantic partners will not reject them (Murray et al., 2002). This leads them to create distance between the self and the close friends and relationship partners (Murray et al., 2000). Therefore, we would expect that studies examining just low self-esteem individuals (e.g., Derrick et al., 2008) would find that parasocial partners—who can't reject

them—would be able to merge with the self more than close friends and romantic partners. Conversely, studies that don't specifically target low self-esteem participants (e.g., Twenge et al., 2007) may not detect that difference. Despite the important difference in the findings, all of these studies suggest that PSRs with fictional characters from television shows and celebrities can protect against the negative effects of rejection (on self-esteem) by increasing feelings of belongingness.

Perceived Relational Value.

PSRs may also increase self-esteem by boosting people's perceived relational value, or social self-worth. Self-esteem is highly related to the feelings of acceptance by others (e.g., Leary, 2012). Therefore, increasing the feelings of acceptance by others (i.e., relational value) is a pathway to increase self-esteem. C. M. Brown et al. (2015) examined how others' acceptance and rejection of favorite media entities (e.g., television shows, musicians) influenced perceived relational value and self-esteem. In an initial study, participants were asked to recall a time when a close other told them they liked or disliked a favored media personality or did not engage in recollection (control) prior to reporting their current self-esteem. Individuals whose media entity was liked experienced a boost to their self-esteem, whereas those whose media entity was disliked experienced a drop in self-esteem. In a subsequent study, participants were led to
believe ↳ their favorite television show was well liked (accepted), not well liked (rejected), or neither (control) by other students at the university. Participants then completed a measure assessing basic need satisfaction (i.e., the extent to which needs for self-esteem, belonging, control, and meaningful existence were satisfied at the moment). Results revealed that others' acceptance of a favorite television show led to increased satisfaction of self-esteem needs. In other words, learning that others share appreciation of PSRs may boost one's perceived relational value, which leads to increased self-esteem.

Identification With a Fandom as a Mechanism.

With the increased accessibility to all kinds of groups on the internet, people can (and do) engage with fandoms regularly, and these fandoms can provide a social identity similar to other social identities (Groane & Hettinger, 2016). In other words, people can feel a bond with others who share their same parasocial bonds (e.g., the Bey Hive group of Beyonce fans), which can lead to increased self-esteem. Research suggests that membership in fan communities enhances enjoyment, appreciation, physiological reactions, knowledge acquisition, and intentions to seek fan-related materials (Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2017). Identifying with others who share a PSR is associated with social well-being and social connection (Wann & Weaver, 2009). Similarly, higher fan identity is associated with higher relational well-being (Vinney et al., 2019). Although none of these studies have examined self-esteem, it seems likely that these increases in social well-being would, in turn, lead to increases in self-esteem (Baumeister, 1998). Future research may want to directly explore that relationship. In summary, research on identifying with a fandom suggests that PSRs may lead to positive feelings about the self via the relational self-esteem provided by feeling connected to other people who share the same PSR.

Taken together, these studies provide strong support for the idea that PSRs can affect self-esteem and that they can do it via multiple avenues. The following section discusses one particular context of such effects.

Parasocial Relationships and Body Esteem

One area where celebrities receive a great deal of scrutiny is in the domain of body image. Indeed, there are long-standing concerns in popular culture and the scientific community that celebrities inevitably have harmful effects on body image. For example, watching Taylor Swift's latest music video may make women feel bad about their own bodies because they feel heavier after comparison to her thin physique. Indeed, the majority of the research examining the effects of media figures on body image points to contrast effects (see Barlett et al., 2008, and Grabe et al., 2008, for meta-analytic reviews).

Specifically, PSRs have a negative impact on body image. For example, Z. Brown and Tiggemann (2016) found that higher levels of celebrity worship were associated with elevated body dissatisfaction among women exposed to celebrities. Additionally, greater wishful identification with a favorite female television character has been associated with heightened body shame and body surveillance (D. Greenwood, 2009; D.

N. Greenwood ↳ & Dal Cin, 2012). Adolescents may be especially likely to display the harmful consequences of PSRs. For instance, Maltby et al. (2005) found a relationship between celebrity worship for intense–personal reasons and attention to body shape among adolescent girls (but not boys/men or women). There is also evidence suggesting that the association between favored celebrities and poor body image among adolescents is due, in part, to social comparisons with PSRs (Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013; Te'eni-Harari & Eyal, 2015).

Multiple studies have also demonstrated unfavorable outcomes for disordered eating attitudes and behaviors. For instance, Harrison (1997) found that higher levels of interpersonal attraction to thin media figures predicted greater eating disorder symptomatology among women. Furthermore, women who experienced a greater discrepancy between their own body and their favorite celebrity's body were more likely to report anorexic and bulimic tendencies (Shorter et al., 2008). Aruguete et al. (2014) also found that men who worshiped celebrities to a greater extent were more likely to exhibit eating disorder symptomatology. Overall, these studies suggest that individuals fall short in their comparisons to PSRs, causing them to feel bad about their own bodies and engage in disordered eating habits.

PSRs have also been examined within the context of cosmetic surgery acceptance, with results continuing to suggest their connection to negative outcomes. In one study, Swami et al. (2009) found that women's adulation of a favorite same-gender celebrity predicted more positive attitudes toward, and consideration of, having cosmetic surgery. Celebrity worship of both intense–personal reasons and entertainment–social reasons predicted acceptance of cosmetic surgery, though intense–personal celebrity worship was the strongest predictor. Furthermore, women and men who engaged in intense–personal worship of celebrities with admirable bodies were more likely to undergo elective cosmetic surgery within an 8-month period (Maltby & Day, 2011). Although the relationship between overall celebrity worship and cosmetic surgery acceptance has been observed among American women, the findings do not appear to extend to South Korean women (Jung & Hwang, 2016).

However, it may be important to consider whether an individual has a parasocial bond with a celebrity because of the potential assimilation effects. In this case, exposure to a beloved Taylor Swift might make women feel thinner by association, leading them to feel better about their bodies. In other words, PSRs may improve body esteem because they alter individuals' perceptions of their own bodies via assimilation processes.

To explore this possibility, Young and colleagues (2012, 2013) conducted a series of studies testing the parasocial relationship–moderation hypothesis: that PSR status with idealized media figures determines whether contrast or assimilation will occur. The initial studies focused on the effects of thin media figures on women's body image (Young et al., 2012). Study 1 manipulated perceived similarity with a thin female model (simulating a PSR) and found that women who were exposed to a thin model with whom they

perceived similarity felt better about their bodies than those who did not perceive ↳ similarity. In Study 2, exposure to a celebrity who was perceived as thin (as opposed to normal weight) led women to feel worse about their bodies (i.e., a contrast effect). This is consistent with the meta-analytic reviews that suggest negative effects of thin celebrities on body esteem. However, having a PSR with the celebrity attenuated and even reversed this effect. Specifically, women who were exposed to a favorite celebrity they perceived as thin felt better about their bodies than those exposed to a control celebrity they perceived as thin (i.e., an assimilation effect). Finally, Study 3 revealed assimilation as the underlying mechanism of increased body satisfaction following exposure to PSRs. Having a PSR with a celebrity predicted increased body satisfaction because women assimilated the celebrity's thin body size to the self.

In a follow-up study, Young et al. (2013) replicated and extended these findings by investigating the effects of PSRs with superheroes on men's body image. Male participants were exposed to a muscular versus nonmuscular image of their favorite versus nonfavorite superhero. Next, participants' current body esteem and handgrip strength were assessed. As predicted, exposure to a muscular (as opposed to nonmuscular) superhero made men feel worse about their bodies when a PSR did not exist (i.e., a contrast effect). However, having a PSR with a muscular superhero not only protected men from the harmful effects on body image, but also led them to display greater physical strength (i.e., an assimilation effect). Taken together, the studies conducted by Young et al. (2012, 2013) suggest that media figures are not inevitably detrimental to body image and may even be beneficial when PSRs exist. This is because PSRs elicit assimilative processes, which can have favorable consequences for individuals' body esteem.

At first glance, the research findings discussed above appear incompatible as studies seem to suggest that PSRs simultaneously have both positive and negative consequences for body image. One potential explanation for this discrepancy might have to do with the nature of the study designs. Whereas the Young et al. (2012, 2013) studies were experimental and manipulated PSR status, the others were correlational (with the exception of Z. Brown & Tiggemann, 2016) and measured PSR or celebrity worship status without manipulating it. Given the correlational nature of the research, it is impossible to determine the causal link between PSRs and poor body image. Although the common interpretation is that PSRs lead to poor body image, it is feasible that poor body image leads people to be drawn to PSRs due to their assimilative benefits (Young et al., 2012, 2013). In other words, if PSRs with Taylor Swift make people feel better about their bodies, then the people who need those boosts the most (i.e., those with negative views of their bodies) may be the most attracted to Swift. This would be similar to finding that people who suffer from headaches are most likely to take pain relievers. It is not that pain relievers lead to headaches—in fact it is the opposite. The positive relationship between headaches and pain relievers is because the pain relievers temporarily alleviate the headaches (see a similar argument regarding the association between PSR and loneliness in

Chapter 10). The same may be true for PSRs and body-esteem issues. People who suffer from low body ↳ esteem may be drawn to PSRs with thin celebrities because they temporarily alleviate their low body esteem (Young et al., 2012, 2013). In support, research does suggest that people are attracted to celebrities who embody their ideals for themselves (Derrick et al., 2008). Thus, the seemingly opposing interpretations regarding PSRs may actually be congruent if the correlational studies are reinterpreted.

Unpublished research conducted by Young and colleagues (2022) provided some initial support for the perspective that people who experience body dissatisfaction are especially drawn to their PSRs. One study experimentally manipulated participants' body image and found that those who experienced body dissatisfaction (compared to a control condition) reported greater interest in activities related to their favorite celebrities. Another study employed a daily diary methodology and found that lower body satisfaction on one day predicted a greater likelihood of exposure to favorite celebrities the following day. Overall, these findings suggest that the correlation between poor body image and PSRs may be due to individuals with poor body image being drawn to their favorite celebrities. Additional research should be conducted to further examine this possibility.

Furthermore, future research should employ more experimental designs to manipulate PSRs and examine their effects on body esteem and disordered eating symptomology. It is hoped this research would shed some light on when and why assimilative and contrastive processes may occur in response to celebrities and fictional characters.

Using PSRs to Regulate Unpleasant States

The previous sections detailed the (mostly) positive effects that PSRs can have on the self. Because people often assimilate PSRs to the self, PSRs can make people feel better about themselves, better about their abilities, and (at least sometimes) better about their bodies. The current section looks at some of the implications of those positive effects.

Self-Affirmation

If PSRs can bolster the self, then they should be particularly useful when those positive effects are necessary. In other words, we should see evidence that people use PSRs to bolster the self in various ways and when they need bolstering the most.

For example, we should see the effects of bolstering the self most strongly in people who are highly motivated to bolster their self-concepts. Narcissists, for example, are particularly interested in affirming any positive attitudes they have toward themselves (Campbell & Foster, 2007). Thus, it may follow that they would be particularly interested in forming bonds with celebrities who allow them to do that. Indeed, research suggests that those higher in narcissism are likely to have intense celebrity interest (Ashe et al., 2005) and are drawn to characters with similarly narcissistic features, such as comic book superheroes (Brodie & Ingram, 2020; Gibson et al., 2018). Furthermore, narcissists may be drawn to celebrities because they tend to find being famous appealing and therefore engage more with, and feel closer to, famous p. 261 celebrities (D. Greenwood et al., 2017). In ↳ other words, people high in narcissism, who tend to characterize themselves as having high self-importance and social power, may be drawn to PSR targets who emulate their desired or perceived level of fame and success.

Similarly, individuals who value specific aspects of themselves may be drawn to celebrities and characters who embody those aspects. Those celebrities would provide a means of bolstering the parts of the self that are most important (Sandvoss, 2005). Indeed, research suggests that the fans' choice of which celebrity to form a PSR with is often based, in part, on their beliefs that the celebrity is similar to themselves in terms of their most important values, beliefs, or personality (Sirgy, 1982). For example, people who are highly materialistic are more likely to form parasocial bonds with sports celebrities, who are perceived as having lavish lifestyles (Sun & Wu, 2012). Additionally, nonfeminist fans of the series *Twilight* were transported into the narrative of the story more than feminist fans, likely due to the nonfeminist themes of the story (Aubrey et al., 2018). Sometimes, the similarity between the PSR and the viewer may be exaggerated by the viewer as a means of bolstering the self (J. Cohen & Hershman-Shitrit, 2017). For example, research suggests that self-reported similarity to an aggressive character predicted greater parasocial interaction, while actual measured trait aggression did not (Q. Tian & Hoffner, 2010). In summary, regardless of whether they are real or imagined similarities, individuals are likely to form PSRs with targets they perceive to be similar to their ideal or most important versions of themselves, and those similarities can help people feel closer to their desired selves. Thus, PSRs with celebrities and characters provide the opportunity for people to affirm the aspects of themselves that they find important.

Escape From Demands on Self

PSRs may also allow people to alleviate the psychological demands of the self (Slater & Cohen, 2016). By assimilating PSRs to the self, people can shift away from thinking about their individual selves (and the stresses and difficulty that might come with that self) by joining the milieu of the media figure for a brief time. Although they focus more on narratives than PSRs, studies examining the temporarily expanded boundaries of the self (TEBOTS) model supported this thesis. Specifically, these studies have found that threats to the self can increase responsiveness to narratives due to the ability of narratives to temporarily expand the boundaries of the self and distract from threats to the nonexpanded self (Johnson et al., 2021). In other words, when one's real self is full of pressures and worries, narratives (and bonds with characters) can provide temporary relief by allowing people to expand the self by vicariously living in a different reality (Slater et al., 2014). In support, research has found that people in a state of reduced self-control showed increased enjoyment of narratives as well as increased transportation into the narrative (Johnson et al., 2015). Conversely, people who were self-affirmed (to alleviate the everyday demands of self-concept maintenance) experienced less narrative engagement (Johnson et al., 2016). Other research, conducted

p. 262 during the time when people were self-isolating during ↳ the COVID-19 pandemic, suggested that people are able to use engagement with narratives to self-expand and thus cope with the identity threats associated with social isolation (Khoo et al., 2021; although see Sacco et al., 2021 for alternate findings). Finally, utilizing an experimental and daily diary methodology, Derrick (2013) found that people were more likely to engage in familiar fictional worlds, including favorite television shows, after exerting self-control and experiencing depletion. Notably, exposure to these familiar fictional worlds restored individuals' depleted self-control and mood. Overall, these studies provided evidence that narratives can increase self-control by allowing an escape from self and suggested that PSRs may also have restorative effects on the self, in particular among depleted individuals who need this help the most. Future research will be necessary to directly examine the effects of PSRs on well-being via escape from self.

Mood Regulation

People may be able to use PSRs to regulate affect and escape unpleasant emotional states. Lakey et al. (2014) found that after experiencing drops in mood, people sought media figures who had previously elicited a positive mood. In doing so, they were able to effectively improve their mood (compared to people who engaged in other activities). Some research suggests that people may be more likely to utilize PSRs to bolster their mood and feelings of connection when traditional social options are limited (e.g., during the COVID-19 pandemic). Specifically, during times of social isolation, more extroverted individuals (who are usually less likely to use PSRs; Derrick et al., 2009) were more likely to take advantage of PSRs as a readily available social opportunity (Naidu et al., 2022). This suggests that people are likely to engage with PSRs in order to fulfill their needs, whether these needs are unfulfilled due to situational constraints, socialization preferences, or personality traits.

In summary, understanding the outcomes of PSRs for the self can provide additional depth to the literature on when people may be drawn to parasocial bonds in order to bolster the self. Because assimilating PSRs can impact the self-concept, people may be drawn to form PSRs when they are highly motivated to improve the self-concept, when the PSRs are perceived as similar to their ideal selves, when they are feeling depleted, and when they are feeling lonely or sad. Overall, research suggests that people can use PSRs to bolster the self and increase positive mood.

Conclusions

One of the amazing things about human beings is our ability to feel connections with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). We connect with not only the people in our lives, but also those we do not even know (Gabriel et al., 2016). We form bonds with actors in television and movies, characters in books, musicians, athletes, and even video game characters. As reviewed in this chapter, these relationships can have important effects on how we think and feel about ourselves. Our thoughts about ourselves can shift as we include PSR targets in our self-concepts; we can change how we feel about our bodies; we can feel capable of things that we otherwise would not feel capable of; we can shift to think of ourselves as lovable and worthy of affection. We can then use those PSRs to strategically shift our thoughts and feelings about ourselves at the times when we need them the most.

Although a great deal is known about the effects of PSRs on the self, there is even more left to be studied. First, and perhaps most essential, not all of the research described in this chapter actually examined PSRs. Some research examined PSRs, but other research examined people who have interest in celebrities or people engaging with narratives. It would be useful for future research to specifically examine the role PSRs play in these findings. For example, does the role of narratives in causing feelings of belonging (which then lead to increases in self-esteem) depend on PSRs with the characters? Alternately, is it enhanced when there are PSRs with the characters (but would still exist without)? Research is necessary to examine those, and other, issues.

In addition, all of the existing research examined contrast and assimilation effects in an "either/or" fashion; people either assimilate a celebrity to the self or they contrast them. This is a reasonable approach as contrast and assimilation have opposite effects on the self, so understanding which occurs at any one time, and with any one relationship, is important. However, in real life, things are never this simple. Media users may experience both pride in a PSR's accomplishment and a sense of self-doubt because of it. They may shift from one of these experiences to the other quickly and fluidly, feeling joyful one moment and then doubtful the next. On the one hand, this is a challenge for researchers. How can one predict whether contrast versus assimilation will happen when it is possible for both to occur and to occur in close proximity to one another? On the other hand, this presents a real opportunity for industrious researchers. Very little research—in any area of social comparison—has examined the coexistence of both contrast and assimilation effects or their close proximity to one another. We suspect this is one of those cases where, as individuals, we are all aware of an experience (feeling both being proud of someone and a little insecure due to their performance), but as scientists, we have not yet unpacked it. Therefore, this would be an area that could greatly benefit from the important contributions that researchers could make.

Future research may also examine if the same self-related outcomes that occur due to PSRs with celebrities and fictional characters also occur in more modern (and thus less studied) methods of forming PSRs. For example, video games introduce a new level of interactivity, allowing players to take on the role of the main character rather than just watching a story unfold (Klimmt et al., 2009; Vorderer, 2000). By acting in the role of the main character, players develop a monadic relationship and can identify with the character they control. Theoretically, this intimate identification could lead to a stronger merging of the player's self and the game character, which could then lead to more intense changes in their self-concept (Klimmt et al., 2009). This suggests that PSRs with video game characters may affect the self more quickly. However, there is also the possibility that the identification with the character in a video game may be less permanent than the identification with a celebrity. With a celebrity, there is an ongoing bond where information is learned over time and often can be gleaned from multiple sources. Conversely, video games provide an intense experience of stepping into the shoes of a character that ends just as quickly when the game is over. Thus, the effects may be more intense, but shorter acting (Klimmt et al., 2009). Future research will be necessary to examine these questions.

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Future research may also want to examine how PSRs can affect the self indirectly through the fandoms that come with them. As we reviewed, identifying with others who share a PSR is associated with social well-being and social connection (which are both highly related to self-esteem; Wann & Weaver, 2009). Similarly, higher fan identity is associated with higher relational well-being (Vinney et al., 2019). Although none of these studies examined self-esteem, it seems likely that these increases in social well-being would, in turn, lead to increases in self-esteem. Very little research has examined how PSRs lead to fandoms and the effects of those fandoms on human thriving. Future research would benefit from directly exploring those relationships.

Finally, correlational data suggest that self-disclosure leads to more "likes" and comments on social media and allows fans to build greater feelings of similarity with the celebrity (Choi & Rifon, 2012; Giles, 2007; Zappavigna, 2012). This increased self-similarity then predicts greater commitment and loyalty to the celebrity and even predicts higher quality of life and higher well-being for the fans (Kim & Kim, 2020). In other words, there is a complicated dance that happens in interactions between PSR targets and the people who feel connected to them. This dance pulls the viewers in and also has the potential to affect feelings about the self. As more and more people become potential targets of PSRs (via the many social media and video-sharing platforms), it will become increasingly interesting (and possible) to study how the information they present about themselves affects (a) the bonds that are formed with them and (b) the way their fans think and feel about themselves.

There has never been a time in history when people have so much exposure to such a wide variety of targets for PSRs. Thus, understanding the impact of PSRs on the self is important, timely, and a great avenue for continuing research. In this chapter, we reviewed the research in this area. Collectively, it strongly suggests that the self-concept can be affected by PSRs, and that people can, and do, use those PSRs strategically to bolster the self. Finally, we can conclude, with great certainty, that much more exciting research is possible and that groundbreaking discoveries are sure to come. This is an area of research with many rich avenues that are wide open for exploration, and we greatly look forward to seeing what comes next.

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