



# How Parasocial Relationships Affected Psycho-emotional Aspects During Social Restrictions in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Maria Carolina Pinotti Leite\*, Mariana Luzia Aron

*Center for Biological and Health Sciences, Mackenzie Presbyterian University, Brazil*

## Abstract

This paper examines the effects of interpersonal and parasocial relationships as coping mechanisms, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The study has three main objectives: (1) to analyze how parasocial relationships may function as coping strategies during social isolation; (2) to investigate their role as emotional support comparable to interpersonal relationships; and (3) to evaluate how parasocial relationships worked during the pandemic. The central hypotheses proposed are: H1 – Parasocial relationships can serve as coping strategies; H2 – Parasocial relationships provide significant emotional support during social isolation; and H3 – In contexts of distancing, parasocial relationships may become as important as, or more important than, traditional interpersonal bonds. Methodologically, the study uses a qualitative literature review (Portuguese, English, Spanish) and an analysis of social media posts from 2020–2023, with attention to rigor and ethical considerations. Findings reveal that both interpersonal and parasocial relationships provide emotional support, foster group belonging, and influence identity construction. Practical implications include strengthening mental health frameworks during crises, especially through recognizing parasocial dynamics as legitimate coping resources. The paper calls for more empirical research post-COVID-19 to deepen understanding of these relationships.

**Keywords:** parasocial relationships, coping mechanisms, COVID-19 pandemic, mental health, social isolation

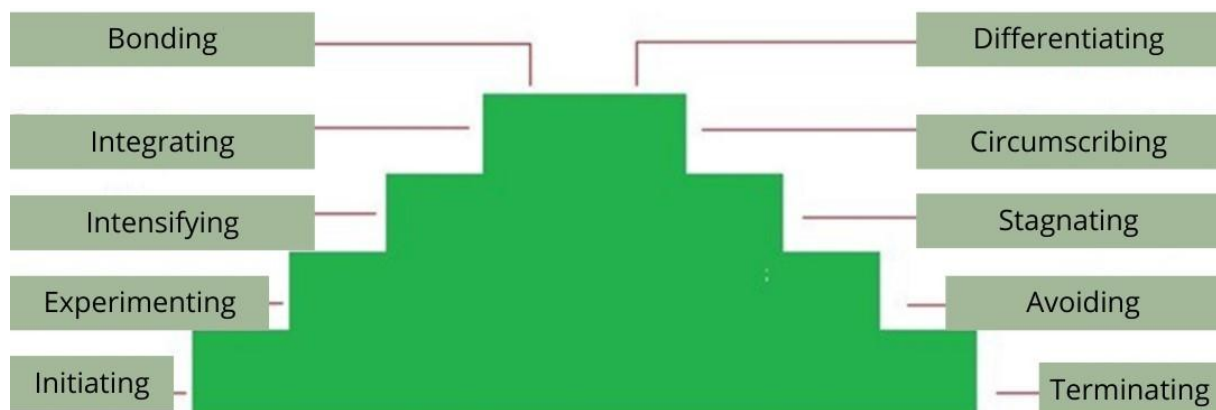
## **1. Introduction**

Like so many other works, this one begins with the idea that the individual is inherently a social being, which develops within various institutional contexts, the first being usually the family (Del Prette, 2001). Within it, there are several types of relationships that can be formed between fathers, mothers, aunts, cousins, grandparents, grandfathers, partners and others, which requires learning a wide range of responses and identifying the moments in which they should be used, forming social skills (Del Prette, 2001). With this trend towards social interactions, the search for the evolution of the means of communication is certain and, today, more than ever, distances are reduced through the internet; With physical barriers having their impact diminished, social interaction starts to create new contexts in which not knowing someone personally does not mean not having close relationships with them.

According to Ellis (2018), the factors behind the construction of any relationship are closeness (how deep the conversations are), influence (how much the other's opinion influences their actions), commitment, and intimacy. The reasons for its construction and even for its maintenance are varied: appearance, similarity, complementarity, rewards, competency, proximity, and disclosure (Ellis, 2018). In terms of appearance, there is not necessarily a fit in social aesthetic standards, but in the first impression one had about that individual, whether he smiles or is perfumed, for example; The similarity arises from the comparison between people who seek similar traits in others, such as values, culture and career; Complementarity also arises from comparison, but this comes to identify opposites, almost like a search for lack and/or balance; rewards infer that there is a tendency to look for people who can bring benefits, who are more competent and/or as competent as in some issue, in addition to cheering and supporting the other; competence refers to having or not skills in a certain hobby/subject/career and/or any other talents that perform well, it is also taken into account if the other is open to teaching and sharing such knowledge; Proximity, in this context, is about the ease with which people can meet, so if they are neighbours, if they work together, if they participate in a common group; "pertinent disclosure" occurs when vulnerability is used at appropriate times and in appropriate quantities, avoiding embarrassment and/or unnecessary overexposure.

Because it is something gradual, the formation of relational bonds occurs within possible levels, both towards greater connection and loss of contact (Ellis, 2018). As shown in Figure 1, the initial stage is called "initiating", a moment in which there is an interest in a first contact and the first impressions are formed; Soon after comes the phase of "experimenting", of actually discovering the other, even if at basic levels, since the comfort and freedom to say certain thoughts and feelings only comes in "intensifying". The last two steps, referring to narrowing, are "integrating" and "bonding", in which, respectively, people come to be seen as a unit and "officialise" the relationship, such as marriages, contracts, matching tattoos, and living together.

Figure 1 - Stages of an interpersonal relationship



Source: Knapp, M. L, Vangelisti, A. L., & Caughlin, J.P., 2014 apud Ellis, 2018, 10  
Min. 26 sec. my adaptation

After reaching the highest level of union within that context, one can either remain in a process of coming and going within the plateau, formed with "differentiation", or start the process of distancing (which does not mean that it could not be reversed, in the same way that the ascension can be interrupted) (Ellis, 2018).

"Differentiation" is when the "we" becomes two separate individuals, the unity is undone, which is not necessarily a bad process, since it brings the resumption of identity and the limits between the "I" and the "other", it is the part that opposes the "connection" in search of a balance and the maintenance of a healthy relationship. Still within a sphere that shows it is

possible to maintain the relationship (Ellis, 2018), there is the "circumscription", in which contact becomes more reduced than in the previous phase, but more frequent than in the next phase, the "stagnation", in which there is a loss of enthusiasm in the relationship and of common interests or in activities that they can carry out together. "Avoidance" is when the distance becomes too great and harmful to the maintenance of the relationship, and can even cause distancing through hostile behaviour and lack of empathy. Finally, the "terminal" point is where the relationship has completely broken down (Ellis, 2018).

Within relationships, another essential point is social support (Ellis, 2018), one responsible for maintaining the bond. This characteristic refers to assistance in challenging moments, as well as emotional, informative, and instrumental support. Clarifying the last two types of support, informational support occurs when the need is in an action related to the other's resources, such as a student asking the teacher for help when writing a text; instrumental support is more characterized as the accomplishment of a task in itself, such as taking someone to the airport (Ellis, 2018). The social support, mentioned earlier in this paragraph, can be observed within what Del Prette (2001), on page 46, called demand: "[...] occasion or opportunity in the face of which a certain social performance is expected in relation to one or more people.", which are regulated by culture; One can exemplify the act of offering a "coffee" when one receives someone in the home of a person raised under Brazilian culture. Not satisfying these social expectations, whether due to lack of learning or practice, are considered maladaptive (Del Prette, 2001), which can lead to a certain exclusion; What avoids this scenario of social detachment is the correct decoding of demands, as previously mentioned, using strategies related to the reading of the environment/context through observation, listening and control of reactivity and one's own reactions, in addition to the analysis of possible consequences.

As previously mentioned, the means of communication have had great advances during the last decades, which has consequently intensified another type of relationship, the parasocial relationship, a term created by Horton & Wohl, in 1956, within the publication "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction". In the text, the authors deal with the relationship between the audience, "engaged", and a person, such as a program host or actress, called "Personae", or "Persona" by researchers such as Bond (2021), Giles (2002), and Tuchakinsky (2010), through the audiovisual television media. Another way to establish this type of relationship is through reading narrative texts or watching a fictitious audiovisual project; in this case, the bond to be created is not necessarily with a real personality, but a character (Bond, 2018; Giles, 2002; Tuchakinsky, 2010; Chory-Assad, Yanen, 2005; Costa, Leão, 2019; Bond, 2021). What these two scenarios have in common is the presence of a mediator - television, radio, books, cinema, among others. However, Horton and Strauss (1957) point out that it is possible to establish a parasocial relationship (PSR) without such means, e.g., a live presentation that has an audience considered relatively large. The PSR can be described as a bond created by the engaged person with a Personae (Bond, 2018) and the person feels that he knows this person in a deep way, but the reverse is not true, since the Personae did not have direct contact with the person engaged (Horton E Strauss, 1956). Therefore, as much as the engaged person may feel that the "bond" formed is personal and reciprocal, it is something illusory (Goldhoorn and Hartmann, 2011), in the sense that it is unilateral, not bilateral. For this work, due to the still open discussions on the question "if both have a minimal interaction, such as, for example, Personae responding to a comment from the engaged person on a social network, is it still possible to apply the term 'parasocial relationship'?" (Bond, 2018), the PSR will only be applied to situations in which there was no direct contact on the part of the Personae, nor the recognition of the engaged person as a unique and singular individual.

Among the factors taken into account for the formation and strengthening of this relationship, Horton & Wohl (1956) and Meyrowitz (1982) point out that the closer to the reality of the engaged party (internal and/or external), the more frequent and consistent the contact and

the better elaborated the strategies used by the media, the greater the tendency for engagement on the part of the public. Explaining the point of media strategies a little better, Goldhoorn and Hartmann (2011) point out that performances and "interactions" through the media seek to address the audience directly, simulating a face-to-face (FtF) conversation (Bond, 2021); an example of this is speaking looking directly at the camera or using words that refer to the pronoun "we", which groups Personae and engaged in the same context (Goldhoorn and Hartmann, 2011).

It is not only the preparation by the Personae that facilitates parasocial interaction, but there are also cognitive, affective and social factors. According to Bond (2021), parasocial and social relationships follow the same behavioural pattern. In 2011, Hartmann & Goldhoorn stated that the ability to take the other's perspective was also fundamental, the so-called "cognitive empathy", which tends to facilitate the predictability of the other's behaviours and thoughts. Issues such as attractiveness (not only related to physical appearance), stability and predictability of the relationship (less exposure to uncertainty and changes) and how it makes the engaged person feel about themselves, or about the world, also directly affect the creation of an PSR (Rubin; McHugh, 1987). Giles (2009) points out that some authors consider the hypothesis of loneliness as a crucial point for the formation of these relationships, while others point out that this is not linked to the issue at all.

In 2002, Giles published the article "Parasocial Interaction: Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research" in which, on page 282, he exposes factors associated with

the formation of Parasocial Interactions (SPI), based on data from studies carried out with samples of the German population (most studies, in general, focus on the American population). Within the aspect of providing "company", the PSRs also involve the need to feel part of a group; within the person-program dynamic, IBOPE points are often due to the expectation of those engaged in the Personae appearing in that edition; for the researcher, empathetic interaction refers to actions that elicit, to some degree, other behaviour and/or affective response, such as covering your eyes when there is a shooting scene with the Persona involved or feeling happy that she survived. Gleich (1996, apud Kreutz, 2021, p.9) found similar items, but analysed them under other names: quasisocial relationship, unique relationships in/from the media, and star relationships. A comparison carried out by Gleich (1996, apud Kreutz, 2021, p.9) showed that the scores on the items mentioned differed between the nationalities of the populations observed (American and German), which raised the hypothesis of interference caused by cultural diversity and the variation in the content transmitted by the media.

Bond (2018) conducted research that revealed the possibility that socially vulnerable groups tend to use PSRs not only as a complement to a common interpersonal relationship, but as a compensatory for the lack of peers within the LGBTQIAP+ community - in the case of his study there was a focus on homosexual and bisexual subjects (Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual or LGB) compared to their heterosexual peers; even so, most research points out that loneliness is not positively related to the probability of developing an PSR (Bond, 2021), but rather the need to feel welcomed and validated (BOND, 2018), in addition to finding references with which to identify (Bond, 2018). In groups that are not considered socially vulnerable, it is more common for people with better social skills to be the ones who most easily establish this type of bond (Bond, 2018).

In the group mentioned above (LGB), what was found was that the positive correlation with the "loneliness" factor occurs in a compensatory way, and not complementary, given the difficulty of finding peers with the same sexual orientation and being accepted (Bond, 2018). The population with difficulty developing the social side may have a strong desire to escape reality or may feel isolated from it (Bond, 2018). This compensation for interpersonal

relationships in "real life" can come to assume the role of assistance in the development of identity and behaviour, in addition to being a safe environment to train social skills and their consequent understanding (Madison; Porter; Greule, 2015).

Still on the proximity to "real life" and to the personality of the engaged, data such as engagement by gender and sexual orientation were gathered in "Parasocial Relationships with Media Personae: Why They Matter and How They Differ Among Heterosexual, Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents" (Bond, 2018). Heterosexual male people tend to relate more to

male personae, unlike their homosexual or bisexual peers, who tend to report greater proximity to female personae. In Chory-Assad and Yanen (2005), what was observed was that the female sample, in 56.5% of the cases, chose someone male, a hypothesis proven by Bond (2018). Following this logic, people who do not identify within the heteronormative standard of society tend to have "gender" as a non-main issue. In addition, the issue of sexual orientation also seems to interfere if the Personae it will be fictitious or not, since, within the study by Bond (2018), LGB adolescents pointed out more parasocial relationships with a Personae than the other group.

Just like any other type of relationship, PSRs also vary according to the intensity of engagement. It is possible to identify three levels, which Tan and Kapadia (2022) bring as "entertainment-social", "intense-personal" and "borderline-pathological". In the first, the bond is weak or non-existent, the relationship happens for the purposes of pure entertainment or to get a conversation with peers; in the second the bond is already stronger, here the engaged person feels part of a relationship, but not in a pathological way; finally, the third level corresponds to those people who can be described as stalkers (from English) or *sasaengs* (from Korean, Romanised writing), being classified as pathological, with behaviours harmful to the engaged and to the Personae. For this work, the intermediary, "intense-personal" will be used, in which there is the formation of a unilateral bond, but without extreme behaviours and feelings.

Being within the area of communication, Kreutz (2021) makes use of how Personae can be carefully constructed by the market-media union to obtain higher sales numbers; exemplifies the scenario by citing the DearU bubble platform, where engaged people can pay monthly to receive direct messages from their favourite idols, intensifying the illusion of a bilateral relationship. This format follows the pattern seen in current social networks in which the internet provides connectivity to everyone at all times, if desired, driving the exploration of a multidimensional model in which "the dimensions of attitude (positive and negative) and parasocial attachment (weak and strong)" (Russell; Stern, 2006, apud Kreutz, 2021, p.7) are manipulated.

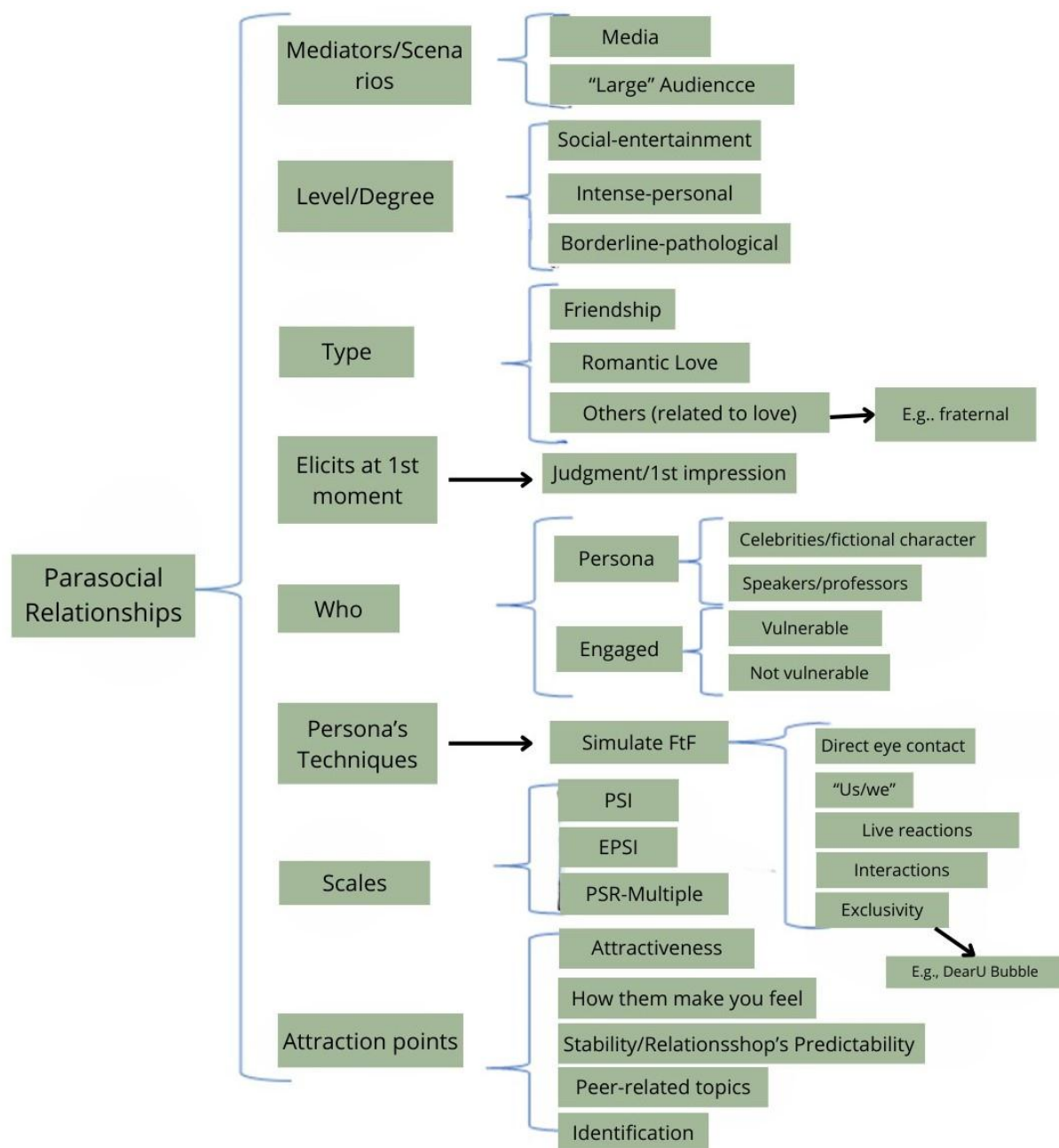
PSRs can also be divided into para-friendship and para-romantic (Tuchakinsky, 2010). In the first, their conceptualization is given as liking them, feeling solidarity/empathy for, trusting them and the desire to communicate with the Persona, in addition to a sense of affinity; in the second, the desire for physical and/or sexual contact and the need for approval are present in addition to the feeling similar to that of falling in love in an FTF relationship. In general, it is possible to approximate the concepts of both parasocial relationships with the so-called "standard" of friendship and romance, with the difference that they are mediated.

and unilateral (Horton; Wohl, 1956). Tuchachinsky (2010) presents data that indicate that the occurrences of PSRs with friendship characteristics are higher among engaged middle-aged people, while adolescents have more para-romantic relationships; also points out that the effects felt by the media are perceived differently according to which subtype of PSR is being maintained.

For a more in-depth study of the SPSR, only two scales are the best known: the PSI Scale (Rubin; Perse; Powell, 1985 and Rubin; Perse, 1987, apud Kreutz, 2021, p.9) and the EPSI Scale (Hartmann; Goldhoorn, 2011, apud Kreutz, 2021, p.9). Although the first is part of the theme, there is a mistake in the juxtaposition of the terms "interaction" and "relationship", so its use in research related to PSRs and not to RPIs is not very useful. There is a similar problem with the EPSI scale, the Parasocial Experience Scale, which focuses on interaction rather than relationship. In addition, (Kreutz, 2021) points out that both focus on intensity and not on quality, form of expression, or interference of the engaged-Persona relationship in real life. To try to make up for part of this shortage, the PSR-Multiple Scale is created; with the proposal of analysing through qualitative responses, it studies the dimensions of "parasocial friendship" and "parasocial romantic love", "identified by the presence of physical attraction and intense emotional responses" (Tukachinsky, 2010, apud Kreutz, 2021, p.9).

For a better understanding of the theme "parasocial relations", the summary scheme presented in Figure 2 was developed. Consider FtF as face-to-face, PSI Scale as Parasocial Interaction Scale, EPSI Scale as Experience of Parasocial Interaction, and PSR-Multiple Scale as Parasocial-relationships measurement scale.

Figure 2 – Main schematic subdivisions of Parasocial Relationships



Source: Author's compilation

Given the importance of social relations in the life of human beings, what could make it more evident than their suppression? At the end of 2019, China was faced with what would be the beginning of the next pandemic; in Wuhan, cases of a respiratory disease, of rapid evolution and dissemination, began to be recorded more and more and the coronavirus was identified in a variant different from those of the last crises (SARS-CoV, in 2002 and MERS-CoV, in 2012), SARS-CoV-2 (Rocha et al., 2021). With transmissibility at 4.08 (one case, on average, leads to 4 new ones), at the end of January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a state of public health emergency at the international level (Rocha et al., 2021), and, in March; still without a vaccine or specific treatment, the recommendation was



prevention through social distancing, in addition to the use of masks and constant hygiene of hands and objects (Almeida et al., 2022).

The combination of health threats and reduced social contact has made the population more prone to triggering mental disorders and other disorders (Oliveira et al., 2022), in addition to interfering with the development of children and adolescents, both cognitive and emotional (Almeida et al., 2022). However, before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify the difference between social isolation (IS) and social distancing (SD); IS can be understood as a definition for interactions considered inappropriate and/or of low quality with any other people (Clair et al., 2021) and this assessment can be made both externally and internally, which leads to situations in which an individual may feel isolated even if they are connected to several contacts (Clair et al., 2021); the difference between SD and SI appears more forcefully when the term "social" is used as a synonym for "physical contact", so SD dictates a minimum safe distance between two or more people and SI is the measure used when the case became positive or suspected for COVID-19, which led to the inexistence of a truly safe distance from that individual (Vidale, 2021). To contain the transmission of the virus, the recommendation referred to physical distancing, from a biological point of view, but the terms were confused in terms of semantics, and "social", a broader term, was used to refer to much more specific actions.

In any case, the process that took place during the period called "social isolation" did not pass without leaving marks on people with its consequences expressing themselves, in the present or in the future. Points such as the length of the isolation period, fear and anxiety about contracting the disease, the bombardment of correct and wrong information in all media, the possibility of providing supplies (from food to medicine), frustration, boredom (Marín-Cortés et al., 2022) and the number of family members in risk groups are determinants of the severity of the effects. The change in routine and in the form of social interaction can lead to symptoms of anxiety and depression, as well as feelings of sadness, changes in sleep, restlessness, inattention, tension, fear, panic, loneliness, irritability (Bezerra et al., 2020) and mental confusion and dissociation (Marín-Cortés et al., 2022) in general and, in the future, the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (Almeida, 2022). Another point in decline is the practice of physical sports: especially among children and adolescents, the practice of sports is mainly social, without this stimulus, most give up the activity. Still in the younger age group, as previously mentioned, there was a drop in cognitive and emotional development and cortisol levels, an increase in the probability of heart inflammation in adulthood and metabolic diseases such as obesity, in addition to functional difficulties and the relationship between the growth of the feeling of loneliness and suicidal ideations (Almeida, 2022). Among university students, a group selected (Oliveira et al., 2022) in their research, there is a union of consequences suffered both by the population in general and by children and adolescents (it is worth remembering that the period of adolescence extends until the age of 19 (WHO, [n.d.]) and part of this population is found in universities around the world), however, with rates of depression and anxiety that may be higher than those analysed in the general average of the population. Another factor of great interference was gender, since Oliveira et al. (2022) indicated a higher prevalence of negative signs of social isolation in women.

Some positive aspects were raised, such as spending more time with family and having more time for personal care and pleasurable activities (Marín-Cortés et al., 2022). These moments can be considered as important means to deal with the negative effects of the historical-social context experienced (Marín-Cortés et al., 2022). Coping is an individual

response to the stressful dynamics of the environment, which can be chronic (Fernandes; Inocente, [n.d.]), and its variations (Palma et al. 2022), adaptations (Fernandes; Inocente, [n.d.]), and should not always be associated with positive outcomes; in refusal (Palma et al., 2022), for example, the person seeks ways to move away from that aversive reality, either by immersing themselves in fantasies or any other distractions. Coping can be considered cognitive and/or behavioural in situations considered beyond the individual's limits, and can be similar to direct actions, search for social and information support and intrapsychic processes, in addition to varying according to demographic variables such as gender, subjectivity and health (Fernandes; Innocent, [n.d.]).

Fernandes and Inocente ([n.d.]) also explain, in their work, that there are two methods used for coping: direct patterns and indirect patterns; The first is when there is the use of skills through an action that affects the demand, the second is when there is no change in the demand, but in the way the individual deals with it, acting as a form of individual adjustment in the face of the situation. This adaptation can appear in the form of denial or isolation, for example. When the focus of coping is directed to the problem, there is an effort to manage it or to manage one's personal interaction with the environment; when the focus turns to the emotional impact of the individual, trying to regulate or replace it (Fernandes; Innocent, [n.d.]).

The strategy that will have the most emphasis in this text will be the one revealed by O'Brien and DeLongis, in their 1996 study (apud Fernandes; Inocente, [n.d.], p.3), in which interpersonal relationships are present. Through them, the individual seeks support from other people to deal with and/or solve the overload situation. Finally, it is worth mentioning that "strategies" refers to cognitive and/or behavioural actions, evaluations, and revaluations that are developed regarding actions, which leads to the elaboration of strategies; if the strategy is escape or avoidance, it is called avoidance strategies (Fernandes; Innocent, [n.d.]).

Parasocial relationships are a branch that is still little explored within the social sciences, but much studied by Marketing and communication sciences in general. It is a fact that, nowadays, with the internet being the gateway to the lives of millions of strangers for millions of strangers, it is essential that Social Psychology seeks to understand how this type of interaction affects reality, both collectively and individually. This work is justified because this social fact influences people's value judgment so that they go through periods such as the context of isolation and social distancing, due to the pandemic of the so-called COVID-19. In this scenario, the population began to communicate with a large part of its network of relationships online, through a screen, the same one that is used as a mediator in parasocial relationships.

## **2. Body of paper**

### **Objective**

The main objective of this paper is to critically examine how parasocial relationships can influence coping abilities in crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Assess parasocial relationships as coping strategies during periods of social isolation and distancing.
2. Evaluate their role in providing emotional and psychological support comparable to interpersonal relationships.
3. Compare their effects with interpersonal relationships in contexts of crisis and loneliness.
4. Highlight their implications for Social Psychology and mental health practices, emphasizing their relevance in therapeutic and preventive approaches.

The study is guided by the following hypotheses:

- **H1:** Parasocial relationships can serve as coping strategies.
- **H2:** Parasocial relationships provide significant emotional support during isolation/social distancing.
- **H3:** In contexts of social isolation/distancing, parasocial relationships may become as important as, or even more important than, interpersonal relationships.

By articulating these objectives and hypotheses, the paper seeks to expand the focus of Social Psychology on parasocial relationships, a subject often discussed in economic and media contexts but less explored in psychological research, and to stimulate further interdisciplinary debates about human connections in the internet age.

## **Method**

This study adopted a qualitative and exploratory design, combining a bibliographic review with the analysis of public social media reports. It can be classified as basic, qualitative, exploratory, bibliographic, and survey research (Muniz, 2020). The approach was predominantly theoretical–methodological, focusing on parasocial relationships and their effects during the specific historical context of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the period of isolation and social distancing imposed as health measures.

The bibliographic review covered scientific articles, undergraduate theses, dissertations, and other peer-reviewed publications, following scientific research standards. The search period extended from January 2023 to October 2023, using databases such as SciELO, Google Scholar, and Bing. Searches were performed in Portuguese, English, and Spanish, applying Boolean operators (AND/OR) and quotation marks to refine results. Examples included: “parasocial relationships” AND “COVID-19”, “parasocial interaction” AND “coping”, “interpersonal relationships” AND “social isolation”, and “coping strategy” AND “pandemic mental health”.

To ensure transparency and rigor, inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined:

- Inclusion criteria: (1) peer-reviewed publications or academic theses/dissertations; (2) studies that addressed parasocial or interpersonal relationships in connection with psychosocial or mental health outcomes; (3) works published between 2020 and 2023, to capture post-pandemic perspectives; and (4) availability of full text in Portuguese, English, or Spanish.
- Exclusion criteria: (1) studies focusing exclusively on economic or marketing perspectives of parasociality, unless they provided transferable theoretical insights about engagement; (2) duplicates across databases; (3) opinion pieces, blog posts, or non-academic texts; and (4) articles restricted by paywall without institutional access.

The search initially returned over 1,600 results for the term parasocial relationships on Google Scholar. However, after applying filters and criteria, only a limited number of works remained relevant. For parasocial relationships specifically, four articles in Portuguese and a larger body of work in English and Spanish were included, reflecting both the scarcity of local academic production and the predominance of international research. This multilingual approach was necessary to expand the scope of the review and to bring part of the international debate into Brazilian Portuguese.

For empirical illustration, social media posts were analyzed as complementary data. The platform Twitter (now “X”) was chosen due to its large number of fan accounts and the public availability of posts. Expressions such as “artist X saved me” were searched in English, Portuguese, and Spanish, varying the artist names. Posts were included if they (1) were publicly available at the time of collection, (2) explicitly referred to experiences of support or coping linked to the pandemic context, and (3) belonged to fan communities with recognizable engagement (e.g., K-pop fandoms). Posts were excluded if they (1) did not relate to coping or emotional support, (2) were made outside the critical pandemic period, or (3) required private access. After screening,

two posts and one fan-to-fan interaction were retained, serving as illustrative examples.

All analyzed posts came from public accounts at the time of data collection. While ethical debates about the use of online content persist, this study followed the principle that content intentionally made public by users can be analyzed when anonymized and contextualized, provided privacy is respected.

The study acknowledges limitations, including the reliance on a small illustrative sample of posts, the focus on a single fandom type (K-pop), and the limited number of psychological studies in Portuguese. Nevertheless, the combination of bibliographic review and social media analysis provides an innovative lens for understanding parasocial relationships within Social Psychology.

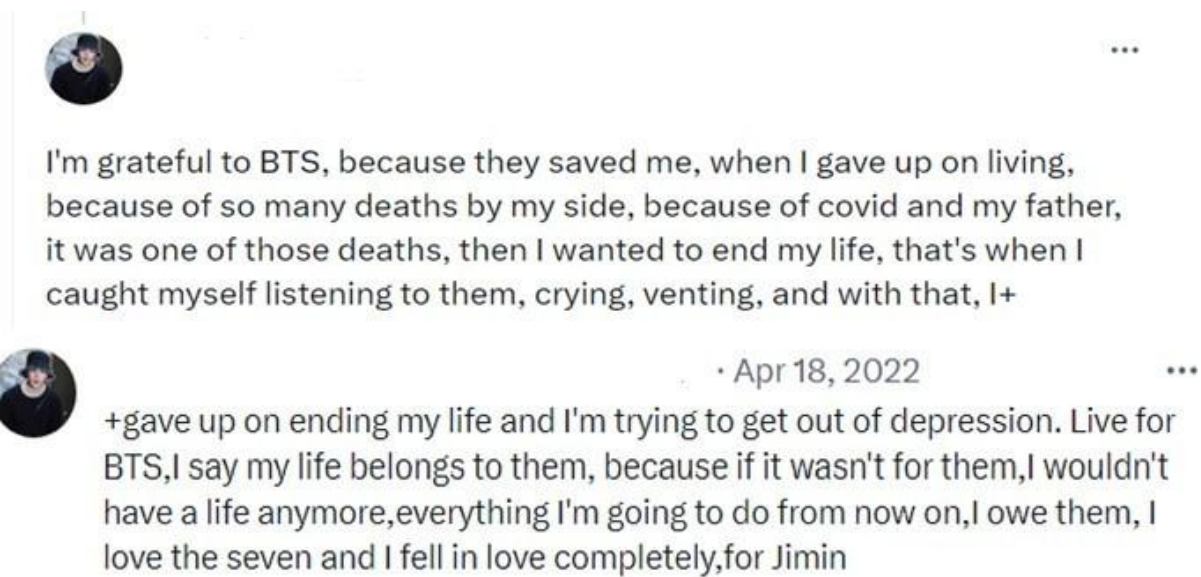
## **Results and Discussion**

After the theoretical explanation, it is now possible to approximate the classic and parasocial interpersonal relationships in general and when used as means of coping.

The first point in which both types of relationship are similar is in the construction and maintenance of the social bond. In interpersonal relationships, as described before, crucial points involve proximity, influence, commitment, intimacy, similarity, complementarity, rewards, support, and others. When it comes to PSRs, proximity to the reality of the engaged person and the persona, frequency of contact with the stimulus, attractiveness, stability and feeling welcomed are essential requirements. It is worth mentioning that there are cultural and behavioural differences within different styles of music, between engaged people from different Personas and even between people engaged. In addition, the reports were written in English, given the greater amount of information available and the consensus of the use of the language as a means of universal communication, not necessarily meaning that the person is part of an Anglo-Saxon culture, but can be from any location. Both types of relationship share essential characteristics, such as proximity, commitment, similarity, stability, and support, despite operating in different contexts, highlighting the universality of certain principles in the formation of social bonds.

In general, it is possible to highlight that both types of relationships emphasize the importance of the other as support and validation, impacting both the way they see the world and the way they behave in everyday situations. To better illustrate these concepts, some posts on social networks were selected as forms of reporting. The fandoms to which users who are part of the K-pop style of music belong, more specifically the groups "Ateez" and "BTS". In Figure 3 it is possible to relate the characteristics of emotional support, even without a two-way communication channel, identification with the problems faced at the time and with the feelings caused by them, gratitude for what the relationship brought and even the differentiation between para-romantic feelings when specifying "having fallen in love" with one of the members, and feelings of para-friendship as he declares their importance in his life and that he loves them.

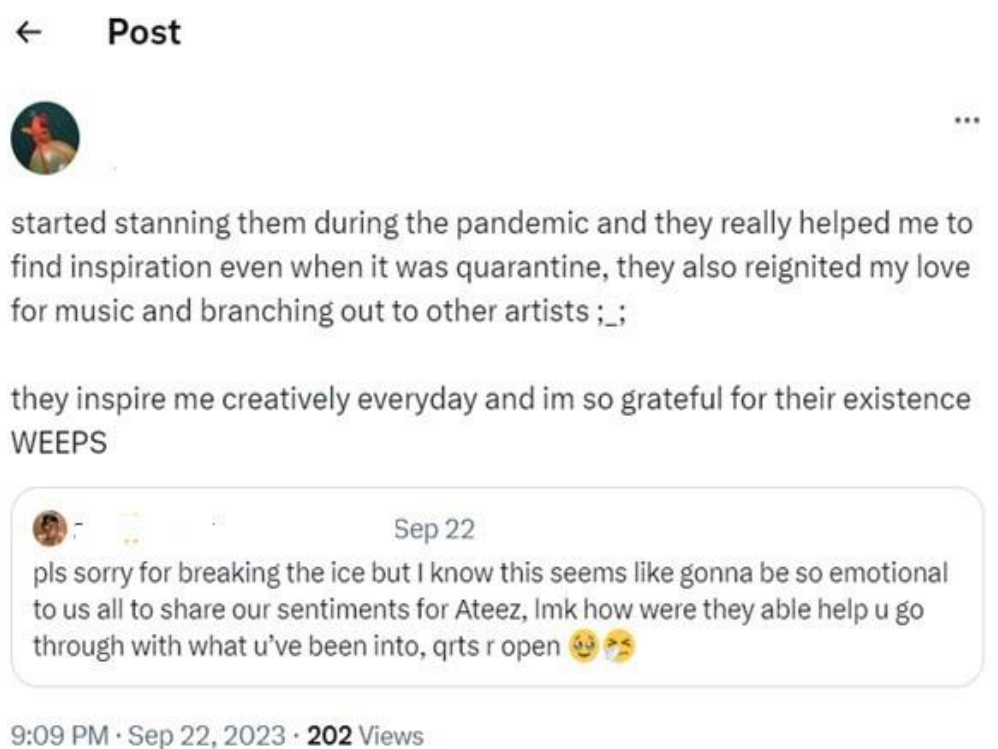
Figure 3 - Support, Identification, para-friendship and para-romance



Source: X, published in Apr 2022.

Studies, such as the one carried out by (Eyal; Dailey, 2012), also compared the effects of both relationships, including their impact on thoughts and attitudes. Figure 4 shows a direct impact of the content produced by the artists and their positions on the interests of the engaged person, influencing the search for discovering and imagining.

Figure 4 - Impact on thoughts and attitudes



Source: X, published in Sep 2023.

Just as the formation and maintenance of the bond can be compared, it is also possible to approximate the concepts of "ending" a relationship, whether romantic or not. When the relationship occupies a place of importance in the individual's life, stress and anguish are present, especially when there is no control over the situations; an example of this can be the move to a place with a different time zone, or even routine (Vega, [n.d.]), whether PSR or

classic. Thus, it is safe to say that there are feelings related to grief and its consequences.

From the end of relationships (romantic and friendship), to the change of address, the grieving process is observed. Grief can be defined as the process resulting from the loss of something or someone significant in the individual's life, whether by death or for any other reason. It can be perceived through emotional instability, sadness, anger, shock, denial, anxiety, and several others that can affect life as a whole (Better Health, 2021). If the grieving process does not unfold in a healthy way, it is possible to develop disorders such as depression (Rodrigues, [n.d.]).

Regarding the types of relationships, it is also possible to draw similarities, since, in both, the individual can develop romantic and friendship feelings. In everyday life, for example, there are stories of platonic love for a classmate or acquaintance, whether reciprocal or not. As for intensity, both in interpersonal (with the scheme shown in Figure 1) and in

parasocial ones, it is possible that the bond is not developed or even that it is developed in a pathological way. It is worth mentioning that, in both relationships, the pathological extreme can be classified between pathological love and pathological jealousy (Henry, 2011 and Magee, 2023) and the sensations of closeness, familiarity, intimacy, understanding and comfort are present, whether unilateral or bilateral (Eyal; Cohen, 2006). Although both types classified as pathological are not pathologies in themselves, but constructs. Pathological love is related to passion and selfless surrender to the subject of interest, providing attention and care in an almost obsessive and submissive way; can be associated with traits borderline and personality disorders with emotional dependence (Jarzyna, 2021). It can also be compared to the effects of addiction, such as harm avoidance, dependence, and impulsivity. As for pathological jealousy, the feeling of possession over the subject is associated, the fear of betrayal (whether founded or not), linked to aggressiveness and the need to control the other; may be associated with paranoid antisocial disorder and narcissistic personality disorder (MCCUTCHEON; Et. al, 2003).

Keeping in mind that an PSR does not replace a classic interpersonal relationship, it is still possible to observe how it ends up helping to combat loneliness (Madison; Porter; Greule, 2015) With this, it is possible to bring another point in which they are similar: the opportunity to feel belonging to a group. A group is understood as a group of individuals who have come together through common tastes, shared space and/or some specific event; Among its characteristics, the group gives greater support to those who are part of it, as well as greater opportunities and confidence; it is worth mentioning that the human being is a social being and his individual existence depends on the existence of a larger group (Brewer, 2007). In a classic relationship, there are chances that the individual will be inserted into the other person's social cycle and expand their own; with the PSRs, the formation of groups can take place among the various engaged, as observed in the culture of the Fandoms. Integration into new environments becomes an achievable outcome in both scenarios. In Figure 5 there is an example of how to be part of a group, in which the common interest is the Persona. It can expand the network of relationships, even generating "classic" interpersonal relationships. In addition, the image also shows an adult audience, refuting the idea that Fandoms they are spaces only for young people. Finally, it is possible to see that both are in different locations and have different cultural backgrounds, but still seek interaction with each other.

Figure 5 - Participating in groups and meeting new people



Source: X, published in Feb 2022.

### 3. Conclusion

This work has examined interpersonal and parasocial relationships as coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings highlight how parasocial bonds, though unilateral, can mirror several psychosocial benefits of interpersonal ties, such as emotional support, belonging, and identity reinforcement. These results suggest that parasocial relationships should be recognized as meaningful coping mechanisms, particularly in contexts of crisis and isolation.

The analysis also underscores practical implications for Social Psychology and mental health practices. By acknowledging parasocial relationships as legitimate sources of emotional support, psychologists can better understand how clients (especially adolescents and young adults) cope with loneliness and uncertainty. Integrating this perspective into therapeutic frameworks may help normalize parasociality as a resource, while also differentiating between adaptive engagement and potentially pathological forms of attachment.

A central challenge of this study lies in the fact that parasocial relationships remain a field still underexplored in Psychology. During the research period, the scarcity of scientific materials directly addressing the theme, especially in Portuguese, was evident, with most of the available works stemming from Marketing and Media Studies. This lack of psychological research limited the theoretical bases available, but at the same time highlights the originality and relevance of investigating the phenomenon within the psychosocial and clinical spheres.

Importantly, the present study does not argue that parasocial relationships should replace interpersonal ones. On the contrary, it emphasizes that they cannot and should not take the place of direct, reciprocal human connections. Their value lies in offering complementary support during moments of vulnerability, such as crises and isolation, but they remain a resource that coexists with, and never substitutes, the richness of interpersonal bonds.

Therefore, this work emphasizes the importance of expanding the discussion of parasocial relationships within Psychology, moving beyond economic or commercial approaches and considering their real implications for mental health and social well-being. Future research should broaden its scope by incorporating diverse cultural contexts, longitudinal designs, and innovative methodologies such as mixed methods or digital



ethnography. Post-pandemic studies are especially needed to understand how parasocial bonds continue to shape coping and resilience in a hyperconnected world.

By situating parasocial relationships within the broader framework of Psychology, this study contributes to ongoing debates about human connection in the digital age. It demonstrates that ignoring or minimizing the role of parasocial bonds is to overlook the multiplicity of ways in which people relate, find meaning, and sustain resilience in times of crisis.

The time of isolation and social distancing of the pandemic deprived human beings of face-to-face interaction, touch, and physical proximity, but it did not limit contact; through technologies such as video calls and online communication channels, people were able to remain integrated into society. With the possibility of meeting others expanded and the environment creating many opportunities for the formation of social and parasocial bonds, denying the importance of both is limiting the importance of all forms of relating that exist and of the human being's capacity for interpersonal relationship.

Finally, there is still much to be studied, not only regarding its effects, but also to seek to understand how factors such as the influence of meso and micro culture, both for engaged and for Personas, as well as topographies of the unfolding of relationships in the short, medium, and long term. This work aimed to emphasize the need to bring the theme into Psychology and demonstrate part of its breadth, inciting debates and new research.

### **Acknowledgment**

We would like to thank Mackenzie Presbyterian University for providing the infrastructure and institutional support necessary for this research.

### **References**

- Almeida, I. de L., Santos, M. M. dos, & Lima, D. F. de. (2022). Social isolation and its impact on child and adolescent development: A systematic review. *Revista Paulista de Pediatria*, 40. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1984-0462/2022/40/2020385>
- Bezerra, C. B., Silva, R. M. da, Soares, F. M., & Silva, B. C. da. (2020). Psychosocial impact of isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic on the Brazilian population: A preliminary cross-sectional analysis. *Saúde e Sociedade*, 29(4), e200412. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-12902020200412>
- Bond, B. J. (2018). Parasocial relationships with media personae: Why they matter and how they differ among heterosexual, lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents. *Media Psychology*, 21(3), 457–485. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2018.1476158>
- Bond, B. J. (2021). Social and parasocial relationships during COVID-19 social distancing. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 38(8), 2309–2331. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211019119>
- Brewer, M. B. (2007). The importance of being we: Human nature and intergroup relations. *American Psychologist*, 62(8), 728–738. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.8.728>
- Chory-Assad, R. M., & Yanen, A. (2005). Hopelessness and loneliness as predictors of older adults' involvement with favorite television performers. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 49(2), 182–201. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem4902\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem4902_4)
- Clair, R., Gordon, M., & Kroon, M. (2021). The effects of social isolation on well-being and life satisfaction during the pandemic. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 8(1), 28.



<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00710-3>

Costa, F. Z. N., & Leao, A. L. M. S. (2019). The organized life of Harry Potter fans. *Organizações & Sociedade*, 25(84), 122-154. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1984-9250847>

Del Prette, A. (2001). *Psychology of interpersonal relationships: Experiences for group work*. Editora Vozes.

Ellis, S. (2018, April 3). Dynamics of interpersonal relationships [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZTIyOw6oJE>

Eyal, K., & Cohen, J. (2006). When good friends say goodbye: A parasocial breakup study. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 50(3), 502-523. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem5003\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem5003_9)

Eyal, K., & Dailey, R. M. (2012). Examining relational maintenance in parasocial relationships. *Mass Communication and Society*, 15(5), 758-781. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2011.618900>

Fernandes, G., & Inocente, N. J. (s.d.). Coping strategies: A bibliographic survey. [https://www.inicepg.univap.br/cd/INIC\\_2010/anais/arquivos/0570\\_0609\\_01.pdf](https://www.inicepg.univap.br/cd/INIC_2010/anais/arquivos/0570_0609_01.pdf)

Giles, D. C. (2002). Parasocial interaction: A review of the literature and a model for future research. *Media Psychology*, 4(3), 279-305. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0403\\_04](https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0403_04)

Goldhoorn, C., & Hartmann, T. (2011). Horton and Wohl revisited: Exploring viewers' experience of parasocial interaction. *Journal of Communication*, 61(6), 1104–1121. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01598.x>

Goode, J., & Robinson, J. D. (2013). Linguistic synchrony in parasocial interaction. *Communication Studies*, 64(4), 453–466. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2013.773923>

Hartmann, T., & Goldhoorn, C. (2011). Horton and Wohl revisited: Exploring viewers' experience of parasocial interaction. *Journal of Communication*, 61(6), 1104–1121. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01598.x>

Horton, D., & Strauss, A. (1957). Interaction in audience-participation shows. *American Journal of Sociology*, 62(6), 579–587. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2773351>

Horton, D., & Wohl, R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049>

Jarzyna, C. L. (2021). Parasocial interaction, the COVID-19 quarantine, and digital age media. *Human Arenas*, 4(3), 413–429. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-020-00156-0>

Knapp, M. L., Vangelisti, A. L., & Caughlin, J. P. (2014). *Interpersonal communication and human relationships* (7th ed.). Pearson.

Kreutz, L. A. T. (2021). The Pied Piper of Seoul: Digital advertising based on types of parasocial relationships and purchase intent among K-Pop fans in Brazil [Master's thesis, University of Brasília]. UnB Repository. <https://bdm.unb.br/handle/10483/32868>

Madison, T. P., Porter, L. V., & Greule, A. (2015). Parasocial compensation hypothesis.

- Imagination, Cognition and Personality, 35(3), 258–279.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0276236615601913>
- Marín-Cortés, A., et al. (2022). Psychological and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and adolescents: A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(19), 12008. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191912008>
- McCutcheon, L. E., Lange, R., & Houran, J. (2003). A cognitive profile of individuals who tend to worship celebrities. *The Journal of Psychology*, 137(4), 309–322.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00223980209604160>
- Oliveira, J. B. de, et al. (2022). Mental health of university students during the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review. *Revista Brasileira de Saúde Ocupacional*, 47, e15.  
<https://doi.org/10.1590/2317-6369/38320pt2022v47e15>
- Perse, E. M., & Rubin, R. B. (1989). Attribution in social and parasocial relationships. *Communication Research*, 16(1), 59–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365089016001003>
- Rocha, R., et al. (2021). The emergence of SARS-CoV-2 and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Ciência & Saúde Coletiva*, 26(10), 4445–4456. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1413-812320212610.00192021>
- Rodrigues, J. C. (s.d.). Luto: Processo, fases e intervenção. *Psicologia.pt*.  
[https://www.psicologia.pt/artigos/ver\\_artigo.php?codigo=A0656](https://www.psicologia.pt/artigos/ver_artigo.php?codigo=A0656)
- Rubin, R. B., & McHugh, M. P. (1987). Development of parasocial interaction relationships. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 31(3), 279–292.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08838158709386664>
- Souza, L. K., & Hutz, C. S. (2008). Personal and social relationships: Friendship in adults. *Psicologia em Estudo*, 13(2), 257–265. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1413-73722008000200007>
- Tukachinsky, R. (2010). Para-romantic love and para-friendships: Development and assessment of a multiple-parasocial relationships scale. *American Communication Journal*, 12(1), 1–29.
- Vega, A. (s.d.). Cómo superar una ruptura parasocial. *MundoPsicologos*.  
<https://www.mundopsicologos.com/articulos/como-superar-una-ruptura-parasocial>
- Vidale, G. (2021). Isolamento social e distanciamento social: Entenda a diferença. *BBC News Brasil*. <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-56302691>
- World Health Organization. (s.d.). Adolescent health. Retrieved October 2023 from <https://www.who.int/health-topics/adolescent-health>