

## **Parasocial Interaction and Television Viewers in Pakistan**

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The concept of parasocial interaction explains the relationship that exists between media consumer(s) and media figure(s). Although it is, more or less, a one-way form of interaction, in this interaction, the viewer identifies a media figure as one of his/her intimate friends or his/her acquaintance just as he/she identifies any other individual in his/her social circle. This research work aimed at exploring 'para-social Interaction' (PSI) with special reference to Pakistani dramas. The study has examined the relationship of TV dramas' viewers with the celebrities of Pakistan's drama industry. For this purpose, a survey ( $N=200$ ) was carried out. Findings from the research showed that watching dramas on TV gives rise to para-social Interaction and does make the viewers develop a feeling of association with celebrities of drama. However, this sense of association does not depend on the amount of time that the respondents spent on watching television dramas; it was rather found to be dependent on other demographic factors such as gender of the viewers, their age, income, education and the viewer's motives/reasons for watching television. Implications of the findings are discussed.

*Keywords:* Parasocial interaction, Pakistani drama, media consumers

Television has been recognized as a very prominent source and medium of Entertainment, Education (Chopra, 2015) and information (Stephanie, 2008). Different studies have found that TV contents affect the viewers in heterogeneous ways (Andre, 2009; Roy, 2013; Soulliere, 2003; Stephanie, 2008). Generally, television is regarded as the "medium of intimacy" and it readily creates an intimate or social relationship with its audience or consumers (Jacobs, 2000). It is commonly believed notion that regular spectators feel a sense of intimacy with characters of television (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). Feelings of this kind are noticeably sensed with celebrities of bigger stardom-magnitude because fans and followers are inquisitive to learn more and more about different celebrities, their lifestyles and behaviors (Morton, 1997 as cited in Roberts, 2007). It is extremely interesting to note that people do not only spend a lot of their time viewing the personalities that they admire, but

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they also try to approach them. Another relevant and worth-mentioning factor is that such affiliations may also be developed for politicians; and, in this way, those politicians may exert a direct or indirect influence over political orientations, opinions and voting behaviors of people (Thorson & Rodgers, 2006).

As a concept, parasocial interaction (PSI) was pioneered by Horton and Wohl in 1956. They attributed this relationship as “one-sided, non-dialectical, controlled by the performer and not susceptible to mutual development”. In its initiation, a parasocial relationship remains a psychological notion, but, with passage of time, researchers began to develop this concept in the field of communication. Jones (2013) noted that audiences are engaged in parasocial interaction are assumed to be experiencing an “illusion”. In this illusion, audiences are tricked into believing that they are personally acquainted with the person being shown on the screen. In other words, in such an interaction viewers feel as if the media figure is known and well recognized to them (Giles & Maltby, 2004; Perse & Rubin, 1989). Although this is a one-way interaction (Coddair, 2015) viewer identifies the media figure as his/her intimate friend (Giles, 2002) and just like any other person in the social circle of the viewer (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). Another relevant factor to mention that there is an obvious conceptual difference between the connotations of parasocial relationships and parasocial interaction. According to arguments of Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm (2006), parasocial interaction is explained as “the one-sided process of consumer’s perception about media person during media exposure”. On the other hand, the relationship is thought of as what a viewer carries and maintains regarding a media figure. Likewise, McDonald and Hu (2005) describe that interaction occurs while viewing whereas the relationship takes place after that observation. It is also held that parasocial relationship actually matters to consumers and they think of it just as if it is their social world (Skumanich & Kintsfather 1998 as cited in Ballantine & Martin, 2005).

Various scholars believe that parasocial relationships are mostly developed by frequent spectators of any celebrity (Butler & Pickett, 2009; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2007). Laken (2009) even went on to declare that lonely people had a special susceptibility to develop such a relationship. But it is also important to note that to have such interaction or to develop such a relationship is in no way abnormality and it is quite a normal and healthy phenomenon (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Scholars have characterized this process as part of a person’s social and emotional

growth phases during his/her childhood and youth (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990). In an identical context, demographic parameters such as gender (Laken, 2009; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011) and age (McCutcheon, Lange, & Houran, 2002; Raviv, Bar-Tal, Raviv, & Ben-Horin, 1996) have also been inferred to be related to PSI.

Moreover, apart from its dependence on demographic factors, the level of PSI is also essentially dependent on various motives (which may also be termed as reasons or causes) of watching television (Tsay & Bodine, 2012). Rubin (1983) opined that people spent time watching television in order to attain their personal gratification and after consideration of different motives. Such motives may encompass both of their active and/or passive strategies i.e. habit, relaxation, pastime, entertainment, information, etc. especially, the level of enjoyment and pleasure that people usually derive from viewing media, are definitely linked with PSI (Oliver, 2008; Oliver, 2009; Raney, 2003; Zillmann & Bryant, 1986). One more factor that cannot be ignored is that there was a time when parasocial relationships used to exist mostly with personalities related to television; whereas, in modern times, social media celebrities have also been included in this phenomenon. One of the main reasons for this phenomenon may be the increased usage of social media outlets by prominent personalities and celebrities for sharing their opinions and activities with their fans (Bennett et al., 2014). As there have been numerous researches oriented around new media technology that endorse the potential influence of blogs and social media on the perceptions of consumers (Thorson & Rodgers, 2006; Frederick, Lim, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012), all these forms of media retain an influence of equal magnitude in developing and maintaining relationships with many of their consumers. There is an additional significant aspect of the concept that in the case of conventional media or television, parasocial relationships used to be restricted to “one-sided” association, in contrast to this, social media celebrities openly interact with the followers, making the phenomenon of parasocial interaction/relationships seem less mono-dimensional, unidirectional (Labrecque, 2014) and/or one-sided.

Television has been recognized as a popular mass medium in Pakistan and many kinds of research have focused on TV and its influences (Amaima et al., 2013; Azhar, 2007; Jahangir, Nawaz, & Khan, 2014; Kaiser, 2013; Shabir, Safdar, & Imran, 2013; Slotsve et al., 2008; Zia, 2014), however, there has been a sheer lack of studies in research literature for examining the relationship between TV figures with TV viewers i.e. para-social interaction (PSI). Keeping this deficiency in view,

the current study aims at examining the para-social relationship of viewers with celebrities related to the Pakistani drama industry. The rationale for selecting “drama” is that dramas have a remarkable eminence when it comes to influencing the society and behavior of people. Moreover, Pakistani drama has always been regarded as a perpetually popular genre among the masses and that’s why observing the liaison of drama-audience with drama-celebrities and analyzing the ways in which these characters impact the consumers become rather instrumental.

In the studies of mass communication, PSI as a concept may conveniently be related to Uses and Gratification theory (UGT), which states that audiences are actual “active agents” in the practice of media consumption. Audiences are well aware of the internal needs, which they maintain; and that is why, they consume external opportunities in order to gratify their needs (Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974). The current study also tends to explore the concept of parasocial interaction with special reference to the demographics of consumers. In addition to this, many other motives (reasons or causes) of watching television have been found related to PSI levels (Tsay & Bodine, 2012). Thus, this research-study hypothesizes the mutual relationship existing between parasocial interaction and motives/reasons to watch television.

### **Hypotheses**

H1: Exposure to television drama is related with the level of parasocial interactions (PSI)

H2: Motives for watching television are associated with parasocial Interactions

H3: There is a difference in the levels of PSI according to the demographic features of viewers (i.e. age, gender, income, qualification, and marital status).

### **Method**

#### **Sample**

The data was collected from 200 respondents of various demographic backgrounds (i.e. age, gender, academic qualification, and income) belonging to Lahore city. Demographic variables included in the study were gender (56% female, and 44% *males*), and age (from 18 years to 56 years); respondents were further segregated into young and old respondents (56.5% were young and 43.5% were old). Other variables

were, marital status (23.5% married and 76.5% unmarried) and Income (most of the participants reported that their per month income was between 30,000 to 50,000 PKR. Forty percent of this sample reported this income. Insofar as education is concerned, 40.5 % respondents were BS or Masters degree holders and 31.5% were on going graduate students.

## Measures

Various validated scales were employed to gauge respondents' exposure to television drama, television motives, and parasocial interaction.

**TV drama exposure.** In order to examine the exposure to TV drama, the respondents had been asked to self-report the amount of time (i.e. hours) they usually spent in watching television drama in a week ( $M= 5.00$ ,  $SD= 5.52$ ).

**TV drama motives.** TV motives scale (Rubin, 1983) was used in this study with minor amendments, meant for making it consistent with the Pakistani samples. In this 10-items scale ( $\alpha= .79$ ) respondents were to report reasons for watching a television drama. The response options ranged from *strongly disagree* (scoring as 1) to *strongly agree* (scoring as 5).

It is relevant to mention that this scale consisted of six variables i.e. pleasure, escapism, relaxation, information, pass time and habit. The reasons to watch drama for pleasure included: because it is entertaining ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ), because it is exciting ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ), because it is stimulating ( $M=3.43$ ,  $SD= 1.11$ ), and to have a good time ( $M= 3.50$ ,  $SD= 1.13$ ). Escapism included reasons, to escape from what I'm doing ( $M= 3.00$ ,  $SD= 1.20$ ), to escape from pressures and responsibilities ( $M= 3.13$ ,  $SD= 1.15$ ). Relaxation included reasons, because it relaxes ( $M= 3.48$ ,  $SD= 1.05$ ), because it allows to calm down ( $M= 3.53$ ,  $SD= 1.12$ ), and it makes me feel less tense ( $M= 3.49$ ,  $SD= 1.12$ ). Pass time included reasons, to pass time ( $M= 3.90$ ,  $SD= 2.36$ ), because I'm bored ( $M= 3.69$ ,  $SD= 1.18$ ), and when I have nothing better to do ( $M= 3.86$ ,  $SD= 1.16$ ). Information included reasons such as to seek information ( $M= 3.26$ ,  $SD= 1.26$ ), to learn something ( $M= 3.40$ ,  $SD= 1.22$ ), and to gain knowledge ( $M= 3.27$ ,  $SD= 1.21$ ). Lastly, habit included reasons such as, because it is convenient ( $M= 3.18$ ,  $SD= 1.12$ ), it is part of my routine  $M= 3.18$ ,  $SD= 1.26$ ), I'm used to it ( $M= 3.32$ ,  $SD= 4.30$ ), and it's a habit ( $M= 3.22$ ,  $SD= 1.29$ ).

**Parasocial interaction (PSI).** parasocial interaction scale was derived from Rubin and Perse (1987) and adopted after making it consistent with Pakistani sample. In order to measure parasocial interaction, a 10-item scale was adopted ( $\alpha = .71$ ) in which respondents were asked to report different activities. The responses ranged from *strongly disagree* (scoring as 1) to *strongly agree* (scoring as 5).

Information asked included: I feel sorry for my favorite actor or actress when he or she makes a mistake ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 1.142$ ), my favorite actor or actress makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with my friends ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ), I see my favorite actor or actress as a natural, humble and well-mannered person ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ), I wait to watching my favorite actor or actress on television ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ), if my favorite actor or actress appeared on another television program, I would watch that program ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 2.41$ ), when my favorite actor or actress is interviewed, he or she seems to understand the kind of things I want to know ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 3.03$ ), If there were a story about my favorite actor or actress in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ), I miss seeing my favorite actor or actress when he or she is not in the media or off screen ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ), I would like to meet my favorite actor or actress personally ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ), I feel my favorite actor or actress to be physically attractive ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ).

### **Procedure**

In order to examine the hypotheses of the study, the survey method was employed. Respondents included students, housewives, and working individuals. The survey lasted for 4 weeks in March 2016, yielding a response rate of 100%. Motives for watching TV for pleasure, escape, relaxation, pastime, information, and habit. Items were from Rubin's (1983) scale for TV use motives. The parasocial interaction scale was derived from Rubin and Perse (1987) and adopted after making it consistent with Pakistani samples. Participants were informed about the risks, benefits, and purpose of the survey before participation. Confidentiality of respondents was ensured and therefore, personal identification such as name, address and personal contact number(s) were not asked.

### **Results**

In order to examine the first and second hypotheses (H1 and H2) of the study, Pearson's Correlation was applied. The first hypothesis

predicted the relationship of drama exposure with TV motives and the level of parasocial interactions. Statistical analysis indicated a significant relationship between television exposure and motives i.e. pleasure ( $r = .27, p < 0.01$ ), relaxation ( $r = .31, p < 0.01$ ), information seeking ( $r = .35, p < 0.01$ ), habit ( $r = .14, p < 0.05$ ), and pass time ( $r = .25, p < 0.01$ ). Contrarily, non-significant relationship ( $r = .11, p > 0.05$ ) existed between television exposure and parasocial interaction. It means that hours spent on watching TV dramas are not linked with para-social interaction. In other words, it may be stated that the amount of watching television drama does not matter when it comes to establishing parasocial interaction with drama celebrities.

Table 1

*Bivariate Correlations among TV exposure and Motives of watching TV*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1.TV Exposure	7.10	5.52	-							
2. Pleasure	3.45	0.91	.27**	-						
3.Escapism	3.07	0.96	-.01	.33**	-					
4.Relaxation	3.50	0.89	.31**	.58**	.44**	-				
5.Info-seeking	3.31	1.06	.35**	.47**	.15*	.59**	-			
6.Habit	3.22	1.48	.14*	.31**	.33**	.34**	.25**	-		
7.Pastime	3.81	1.15	.25**	.34**	.18**	.17*	.12	.23**	-	
8.PSI	3.54	0.79	.11	.56**	.17*	.43**	.40**	.27**	.26**	-

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .001$

Insofar as second hypothesis of the study (H2) is concerned, it examines the relationship between 1).

**Demographics and Parasocial Interaction.** The third hypothesis of the study observes the relationship of parasocial interaction with demographics (i.e. age, gender, income, education, and marital status), of the viewers. For the purpose, statistical tests have been applied according to the nature of data.

**Age and Income.** Since the data related to age and income was continuous in nature, the Pearson correlation test had been applied to it. In statistical findings, parasocial interaction was significantly correlated with income ( $r = .15, p < 0.05$ ) and age ( $r = .48, p < 0.05$ ) (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Correlation among age, income, and PSI*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Age	Income	PSI
Age	24.50	7.91	-	-	-
Income	37711.0	21692.9	.27**	-	-
PSI	22.42	9.48	.48**	.15*	-

\*p < .05, \*\*p<.01

**Gender.** The study examined the parasocial interaction in terms of gender *T-test* was used to find the differences been applied. Table 2 shows the results from independent samples *t-test*. A significant difference males and females in terms of parasocial interaction ( $t = -2.13$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Mean score indicates that females ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ) feel more parasocial interaction with their favorite celebrities than males ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ) (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Means, Standard Deviations, and t-test results by gender of variables*

	Gender	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
PSI	Male	3.41	0.71			
	Female	3.65	0.84	-2.13	198	.034

Note. PSI= para Social Interaction *M* = Mean. *SD*= Standard Deviation. \*p < .05

**Marital status.** In order to examine the relationship between para-social interaction and marital status, a *t-test* had been applied. Results indicated a nonsignificant difference in para-social interaction across the marital status. Indicating no significant differences between singles ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = .83$ ) and married ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 0.05$ ) ( $t_{(198)} = -0.95$ ,  $p < .05$ )

**Education.** One-way ANOVA has been performed for finding out the relation/influence of education on para-social interaction. Statistical results showed nonsignificant difference ( $F(6,192) = 1.06$ ,  $p = .416$ ) between para-social interaction and levels of education.

Data collected from 200 respondents of the survey pointed out that the most liked element of Pakistani drama was its story and most of the people (42%) liked script or the storyline. Most of the people disliked 67 (33.5 %) acting or performance of the drama actors. Respondents were of the opinion that Pakistani dramas do highlight the social issue of our

society 123 (61.5%). However, data showed that mostly Pakistani TV drama represented elite class 92(46%) followed by middle class 52 (26%) and representation of lower-class was found very low.

### **Discussion**

The research work intended to analyze viewers' psychological and emotional relationships with television drama celebrities i.e. parasocial Interaction (PSI). The findings of the study fully endorsed the second hypothesis, however, the first and third hypotheses of this study have been validated partially only. Results of the study signified that watching television dramas does cause parasocial interaction and exposure to TV drama does make the viewers experience a sense of association with the drama celebrities; however, the degree of a relationship varies among diversified viewers. This relationship is significantly reliant on various factors such as the motives of viewers for watching television and on their specific demographic attributes as well.

Primarily, it has been found out that exposure to television is related to different motives associated with watching television which means that viewers spend their time to watch dramas in order to fulfill their particular purposes such as pleasure, relaxation, leisure, or seeking information, etc. Another valuable inference of this study is that the level of PSI does not depend on the amount of time that viewers spend on watching dramas. In simpler words, parasocial relationships are dependent on varied demographic features of the audience and on viewers' motives/reasons for watching television.

### **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that spending more and more hours for viewing television dramas does not necessitate that such persistent viewers would develop more interaction with celebrities and would feel any kind of emotional and/or mental association with celebrities. That is where the results negated the assumption that exposure and PSI were in some manner related to each other. The most prominent of the reasons behind this disassociation may be construed that most of the Pakistanis watch TV dramas only for the sake of recreation/entertainment and do not readily inspire by any themes and between-the-lines messages of the storylines of the drama. It has been generally observed that people of Pakistan are inclined more towards spending their leisure time watching international movies, soaps, and reality shows. Pakistani viewers are mostly thought to be admirers and followers of international show biz

celebrities much more in comparison to Pakistani dramas and celebrities. Another reason can also be based on the argument that the Pakistani public only takes news and currents affairs based programs seriously rather than frequently following Pakistani entertainment shows.

Insofar as the mutual relationship between PSI and demographic features is concerned, this study put forth the findings that age was not related to the level of parasocial interaction; and similarly, PSI was observed to be insignificantly related with marital status and academic qualification of the viewers. In contrast to marital status and academic qualification, gender turned out to be linked with PSI; and female viewers were found relatively more inclined towards drama celebrities and were more likely to develop a parasocial relationship with drama stars. In addition to this, income has also been observed as an influential factor and the people with more earnings are more likely to retain a relatively higher level of PSI.

It is important to mention that the research instrument of this study, i.e. the questionnaire designed for this research, did comprise a few general questions to appraise the opinions of respondents regarding Pakistani dramas. In this regard, “script” was selected as the most favorite/liked element of drama by most of the respondents; however, an unusual public opinion came across when the participants expressed aversion from the elements of “acting” or “performance of celebrities” in the drama. When inquiring about the dramatic representation of different economic strata, the participants were of the opinion that the subject of the stories was confined to the elite and middle class only; and the respondents also indicated the negligent tendencies of drama-writers in terms of issues of the lower class of the country.

### **Limitations and Suggestions**

Insofar as limitations of this study are concerned, one of the main limitations of this research is that the process of data collection was restricted to inhabitants of Lahore city which deprived the researcher of the opportunity of collecting opinions of the people belonging to various other cities and provinces of Pakistan. Keeping this location-based limitation in the view, it has been recommended that for having a broader representation of the viewers, future studies may be expanded to dwellers or natives of other locations, cities and/or provinces. Additionally, since the results of the current study could not trace a remarkably strong parasocial Interaction with drama viewers; the forthcoming researches may endeavor to study and draw comparisons between Pakistani and

international drama viewers with a particular reference to the concept/notion of a parasocial relationship.

Lastly, since celebrities influence the everyday lives of viewers/fans, it is of great importance to examine the relationship of celebrities with viewers across different dimensions. It is hoped that this research would generate interest in other researchers and readers to explore the variety of dimensions of PSI with reference to Pakistani drama celebrities.

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