

# Parasocial Relationships as Functional Social Alternatives During Pandemic-Induced Social Distancing

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The COVID-19 pandemic compelled people to engage in social distancing protocols that increased media exposure and transitioned social interactions to digital spaces, providing a unique context to study the compensation function of parasocial relationships (PSRs) with fictional characters and celebrities. Published analyses from a 4-wave panel survey conducted with U.S. adults ( $N = 166$ ) during the pandemic revealed that decreased face-to-face interactions and increased mediated interactions with friends predicted PSR growth (Bond, 2021). This study concluded that pandemic-induced reliance on screens to engage with real-life friends may have blurred the cognitive distinctions between real-life friends and liked media personae, thereby strengthening PSRs. The present study aimed to further investigate this line of reasoning by incorporating parasocial interaction (PSI) into a secondary analysis of the longitudinal data. Participant-reported liked media personae were coded for their PSI potential, defined as likelihood of engaging audiences in illusory interactions. Results suggest that PSRs experienced significant growth during the pandemic, particularly PSRs with media personae more likely to invoke PSI among those who also increased their mediated social interactions with real-life friends. These findings support and extend the conclusions of the initial analyses: PSRs may serve a compensation function during social distancing, and increased exposure to real-life friends through screen media may blur the lines between the social and parasocial, increasing the value of PSRs during social distancing.

## Public Policy Relevance Statement

Individuals develop affective bonds with favorite celebrities and fictional characters known as parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships provide companionship, especially when the liked media personae are depicted performing cues that encourage illusory interactions among viewers and when individuals are dependent on mediated social communication to sustain their real-life social relationships. The function of liked media personae as components of individuals' social circles more closely mimics real-life friends during periods of media dependency and, in turn, could serve beneficial emotional and coping purposes during global crises that stymie social relationships.

**Keywords:** parasocial interaction, parasocial relationship, parasocial compensation, social distancing

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In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus outbreak (causing COVID-19) a global health pandemic. Medical professionals, public health agencies, and news pundits called on the public to stay at home and take appropriate avoidance measures when leaving home—an intervention strategy referred to as social distancing (IHME, 2020). The intended effect of social distancing was to curb transmission of the

highly contagious COVID-19 virus, though the preventative measure undoubtedly had unintended effects as well.

The mobility constraints inherent to social distancing meant that people were significantly more reliant on screens for entertainment and escapism. A national survey in the United States found that 70% of Americans watched more TV during the pandemic than they had watched prepandemic, and 34% added at least one new subscription streaming service to their entertainment media repertoire (Fondulas, 2020). Social distancing also meant that screens became the primary channels for staying connected to friends (Ellis et al., 2020). Video apps such as Zoom, Houseparty, and Google Meet experienced explosive growth, with new downloads increasing by over 1,000% in the months immediately following the first calls for social distancing (Meisenzahl, 2020). Social distancing influenced how much time people spent with media and how they sustained their social relationships, cultivating a unique environment in which to study how people engaged and connected

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with their favorite celebrities and fictional characters (i.e., media personae).

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are socioemotional bonds that individuals develop with media personae (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Though viewers<sup>1</sup> maintain PSRs with personae known to them only through mediated channels, PSRs with liked media personae can provide companionship and social support (Cohen, 2009; Klimmt et al., 2006; Hartmann, 2017). The parasocial compensation hypothesis predicts that PSRs with liked media personae can not only extend viewers' perceived social circles but also serve as functional alternatives to social relationships (Madison et al., 2016). The compensation function of PSRs has received ambiguous empirical support and is debated within the media psychology literature. The COVID-19 pandemic provided an unprecedented opportunity to study the compensation function of PSRs in a natural setting where people increased their media consumption while making abrupt alterations to their social interactions with friends.

A panel survey conducted during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic found that participants who decreased their face-to-face (FtF) social interactions also reported the strongest growth in their PSRs with liked media personae—supporting the compensation function of PSRs. However, the study also found that those who increased their mediated social interactions with friends experienced the greatest intensity of PSR growth—justifying what the author referred to as a “blurred line” between the social and parasocial (Bond, 2021). If the “blurred lines” conclusion holds true, then the reliance on screen media to engage with friends during the COVID-19 pandemic should predict stronger PSRs, *especially* with media personae who use performative cues such as eye gaze and bodily stance to create an illusion of interaction (Cohen et al., 2019).

The objective of the present study was to further investigate the compensation function of PSRs during the COVID-19 pandemic by varying and expanding analyses of the four-wave panel survey data previously reported to introduce parasocial interaction (PSI) potential of media personae as a moderating variable capable of explaining the association between mediated social interactions with friends and PSRs with media personae.

### Parasocial Compensation

PSRs are defined as intimate, affective bonds that viewers develop with liked media personae (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Though negative PSRs can be cultivated with disliked media personae, the focus in the present study is on positive PSRs often considered meaningful components of people's perceived social worlds (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). PSRs are believed to be psychologically authentic and real to individuals experiencing them, even though PSRs are historically defined by their lack of mutual association. Viewers may perceive liked TV characters as important others with whom they enjoy spending time, but the TV characters do not reciprocate the affection.

The parasocial compensation hypothesis predicts that PSRs can satisfy social needs for individuals with deficiencies in their social relationships (Madison et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2008). Empirical research has largely refuted the compensation function of PSRs: People who possess personality characteristics that facilitate strong social relationships (e.g., empathy, extroversion, and need to belong) tend to also have the strongest PSRs (Chory-Assad &

Yanen, 2005; Rubin et al., 1985; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). As such, PSRs are considered complementary to social networks rather than compensatory (Cohen, 2009). Studies investigating parasocial compensation through the lens of loneliness have produced more mixed results. Though meta-analyses of the parasocial literature have found no consistent, direct correlations between PSRs and loneliness (Schiappa et al., 2007; Tukachinsky et al., 2020), individual studies measuring specific dimensions of loneliness (Wang et al., 2008) or those sampling socially vulnerable populations (Bond, 2018) have found significant positive associations between PSRs and loneliness. In all of the aforementioned studies, however, loneliness was measured as a subjective sense of isolation; social distancing allows for the study of a more objective reality related to amount of social contact. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, participants had the free will to engage with their friends using any number of communicative and relational behaviors and to experience entertainment and escapism through any number of life experiences. The compensation function of PSRs may operate differently during a public health crisis that required social distancing.

### The COVID-19 Pandemic

People modified their behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic in response to public health messaging that advocated social distancing, as evidenced by both self-report data finding that 95% of people were quarantining in their homes as much as possible (Taylor et al., 2020) and mobility-tracking data revealing that travel in the United States was down over 50% in the first 3 months of 2020 (IHME, 2020). The hasty alterations to people's daily routines produced negative moods, feelings of social rejection, and loneliness (Ellis et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2020), potentially increasing the likelihood that people turned to their favorite media personae for support, companionship, and comfort (Stever, 2011). Research suggests that even being reminded of favorite TV shows (Derrick et al., 2009) or liked celebrities (Twenge et al., 2007) can reduce negative emotions. The potential benefits of PSRs during the rather anomalous age of social distancing may also explain why an international survey found that 96% of participants reported watching TV or movies as a coping strategy to alleviate pandemic-induced stress, more than any other activity including mediated interactions with friends (Taylor et al., 2020). Social distancing also stymied traditional FtF social interactions with friends. Rather than wear protective facial coverings and maintain 6 feet of distance from friends, individuals relied on mediated channels to maintain social relationships (Ellis et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic meant that people sustained their friendships through screens, the same channels through which PSRs have long been maintained.

Bond's (2021) four-wave panel survey investigating PSRs during pandemic-induced social distancing, a rarely attainable real-world context optimal for studying parasocial compensation,

<sup>1</sup> Though individuals can develop PSRs with celebrities and fictional characters whom they are exposed to through audio and print media, the PSR literature has attended to screen media most prominently (Cohen, 2009; Klimmt et al., 2006; Hartmann, 2017; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019), and the participants in the present study primarily report celebrities and fictional characters with whom exposure through screens is likely. As such, “viewer” is used throughout the manuscript to refer to media consumers.

found that decreases in FtF social interaction over the 6-week data collection period predicted growth in PSR intensity, supporting the premise of the parasocial compensation hypothesis. However, the study found that *increased* use of communication technologies to stay engaged with friends also predicted growth in PSR intensity. One potential explanation of this finding refutes the compensation function of PSR—those with a high need for social connection both maintained social interactions with friends online and increased their PSRs with liked media personae. Another explanation given notable attention by the author lies in a blurred lines argument, such that individuals who significantly increased the use of screens to engage with friends were then able to more easily process media personae as authentic, real individuals possessing personhood. As a result, PSRs grew more socially meaningful for those who also increased social interactions with friends through mediated channels. If the cognitive distinctions between friends and media personae on screens did indeed blur as individuals living through a global pandemic became media dependent, then the frequency and complexity of perceived interactions with media personae would be of particular value to investigate. Media personae differ in their PSI potential, a distinct concept that was absent from the initial study.

### Parasocial Interaction

PSIs can be understood as the illusions of social interaction with media personae that take place during media exposure. [Horton and Wohl \(1956\)](#) described the PSI phenomenon as a “simulacrum of conversational give-and-take” (p. 215). PSIs create feelings of interpersonal engagement with media personae even though individuals know reciprocity, a foundation to interpersonal communication, is not an affordance of traditional screen media such as TV and film ([Hartmann, 2017](#)).

PSIs are more likely to occur when media personae engage in performative cues that signify acknowledgment of the audience: eye gazing, bodily address, and audience address, to name a few ([Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011](#)). TV viewers may see their favorite nightly news anchors appear onscreen, gaze directly into their living room, and address them from an open bodily position. Taken together, the news anchors’ performative cues may cultivate a sense of interpersonal intimacy that makes it seem as if the news anchor is speaking directly to the viewers. In one experimental study conducted by [Cohen et al. \(2019\)](#), participants were either shown a clip from a political drama in which the protagonist addressed the audience directly and disclosed his innermost thoughts and desires, or the same clip with the direct address segments removed. Those who saw the direct address clip reported stronger PSI than those who saw the edited clip, though self-reports of other character affinity variables (e.g., identification) did not differ between conditions. PSIs are episodic, but repeated PSI can lead to PSRs that transcend individual media experiences ([Hartmann, 2017](#); [Klimmt et al., 2006](#); [Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019](#)).

### The Present Study

The pandemic-induced transition from FtF social interactions to mediated social interactions may have created an environment wherein mediated interactions with friends became analogous to

PSIs with media personae. Though mediated social interactions with friends are likely reciprocal, reliance on screens to communicate with friends means that social relationships become two-dimensional, eye contact is distorted, physical touch is lost, and bandwidth influences social cues ([Bondavera & Bouwhuis, 2004](#)). A comparison of results from [Hauber et al. \(2005\)](#) and [Lee \(2013\)](#) suggests that exposure to an unfamiliar televised media figure engaging in interpersonal-provoking cues (i.e., a politician speaking into the camera) creates social salience closely mirroring that created during a mediated social interaction (i.e., playing a game with others through videoconferencing). The blurred lines between mediated social interactions and PSIs may be explained by cognitive processing. [Reeves and Nass \(1996\)](#) contended that viewers do not invest the cognitive effort necessary to differentiate their onscreen, imagined experiences from their real-life social experiences even though they are quite capable of doing so. Thus, the illusory media narratives (and by proxy the characters portrayed within those narratives) may be encoded similarly to lived experiences ([Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011](#)), which is then amplified when interactions with friends are also bounded to screens.

[Hartmann \(2008\)](#) postulated that similarities between mediated social interactions and PSI could be explicated through perceived distance, or the degree to which a viewer believes that their responses have an effect on their interaction partner. [Hartmann \(2008\)](#) argued that when people engage with friends via mediated means such as video chat, they experience increased perceived distance that may alter the cognitive processing of reciprocal others (e.g., real-life friends) to more closely mirror the cognitive processing of nonreciprocal others (e.g., media personae). The alteration to perceived distance may allow for more intentional processing of PSI, which in turn strengthens PSRs ([Klimmt et al., 2006](#)).

The present study is a secondary analysis of data collected from a panel survey that found that PSRs grew significantly over the course of a 6-week period during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic ([Bond, 2021](#)). In the survey, participants were asked to report the names of four of their most liked fictional characters or celebrities following the prompt, “List media personae you feel connected to, almost like they are your friends even though you’ve never met them in real life.” The original analyses combined all four media personae into one cumulative mean score for PSR strength at each wave of data collection. This aggregate approach ignores within participant variance. Given that PSR studies are almost exclusively designed to measure PSR with a single media persona ([Bond, 2018](#); [Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005](#); [Dibble et al., 2016](#); [Madison et al., 2016](#); [Wang et al., 2008](#)), the first media persona reported by each participant was used in the present analysis. Given the focus on one unique PSR, the original hypothesis predicting PSR growth over time was reanalyzed to strengthen the claim that *PSRs with media personae will experience significant growth over time during the COVID-19 pandemic* (Hypothesis 1).

If PSRs serve a compensation function, then losing FtF social engagement opportunities during the pandemic should strengthen PSRs regardless of PSI. Thus, *participants who decreased their FtF social interactions during social distancing will experience more intense growth in PSRs than those who maintained or increased their FtF social interactions* (Hypothesis 2a). This relationship will remain significant regardless of liked media personae PSI potential (Hypothesis 2b).

Parasocial compensation would predict a complementary hypothesis for mediated social interactions. An increase in mediated social interactions would allow individuals to better sustain their friendships during social distancing; consequently, PSRs would not be needed to compensate for social deficiencies. However, the original analyses found the opposite. If increased mediated social interactions predict PSR growth, and this relationship is explained by increased similarities in the cognitive processing of social interactions and PSI, then PSI potential should interact with increased mediated social interactions to predict PSR growth. Thus, *participants who increased their mediated social interactions during social distancing will experience more intense growth in PSRs than those who maintained or decreased their mediated social interactions* (Hypothesis 3a). This relationship will be stronger among participants reporting PSRs with liked media personae high in PSI potential than those reporting PSRs with liked media personae low in PSI potential (Hypothesis 3b).

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Participants ( $N = 166$ ) ranged in age from 18 to 73 ( $M = 26.87$ ;  $SD = 8.44$ ). The sample was majority female (61%;  $n = 101$ ) and White (81%;  $n = 134$ ). Participants represented 25 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. Though most participants were working full time (59%;  $n = 98$ ), 18% ( $n = 29$ ) reported being unemployed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 90% ( $n = 150$ ) reported cohabiting with at least one other adult during social distancing. Participants were recruited from social media platforms, primarily Reddit, for a study “investigating the effects of social distancing.”

### Survey Measures

PSRs, FtF social interaction, mediated social interaction, media exposure, and exposure to liked media personae were measured during each wave of data collection (referred to as T1, T2, T3, and T4). Demographics and anxious attachment were measured at T1. Gender, race, age, fame derivation, and PSI potential of the media personae cited by participants were coded after data collection was complete. FtF and mediated social interactions with friends were frequency measures that asked participants to respond from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*).

PSRs were measured with the short version of the PSI scale (Rubin et al., 1985). The scale’s name is misleading, as rigorous validity tests have suggested that the scale’s items measure enduring socioemotional bonds with media personae rather than episodic conversational give-and-take experiences (Dibble et al., 2016). Dibble et al. (2016) also suggested that the scale is highly correlated with alternative measures of parasocial friendships rather than other types of amicable PSRs, increasing its validity in the present study. Internal consistency of the scale was recalculated in this secondary analysis to account for each liked media persona being considered a distinct data point. The scale maintained internal consistency across time ( $\alpha_{T1} = .72$ ,  $\alpha_{T2} = .82$ ,  $\alpha_{T3} = .82$ , and  $\alpha_{T4} = .85$ ). Details and sample items from the self-report measures are available in the article by Bond (2021).

### Parasocial Interaction Potential

PSI potential was defined as the likelihood of experiencing simulated interaction with media personae determined by the performance of interpersonal-provoking cues. Performative cues determined to increase PSI potential included eye gaze that directly addressed the audience, bodily address, or verbal address (Cohen et al., 2019; Dibble et al., 2016; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Social media presence was also taken into consideration when coding. An actor with no social media presence would have lower PSI potential than a musical artist who consistently self-discloses on social media platforms. Complete conceptual and operational definitions of PSI potential are provided as [online supplementary material](#).

Coding media personae for their PSI potential is a novel concept in the PSR literature, though the premise for the coding procedure was derived from Auter and Moore (1993), who content analyzed the interactivity levels of salespersons on televised shopping networks using a 4-point scale. This previous work provided the foundation for creating the PSI potential scale ranging from 1 (*low PSI potential*) to 4 (*high PSI potential*). Two independent coders were instructed to consider the 4-point scale a continuum of PSI potential when analyzing media personae. For example, fictional characters who are not depicted engaging with the aforementioned performative cues and have little to no social media presence were coded as 1 (e.g., Arya Stark). YouTube influencers who rely on the aforementioned performative cues in their messaging were coded as 4 (e.g., Remi Cruz). Coders conducted independent research on each media personae for coding assistance. Interrater reliability (Krippendorff’s  $\alpha = .89$ ) was calculated from double-coding 20% of the sample.

Coders also categorized each media persona by gender ( $\alpha = 1.00$ ), race ( $\alpha = .90$ ), age ( $\alpha = .80$ ), and fame derivation ( $\alpha = .95$ ) for descriptive purposes. Fame derivation represented how the media personae were most likely known to participants. Media personae often cross media. In these cases, coders based judgment on the medium in which the persona first acquired fame.<sup>2</sup>

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive analyses supported the assumption that participants were altering their communication patterns as a result of the pandemic. Participants spent less time communicating with friends FtF ( $M$  range = 2.40–2.81) than through mediated channels ( $M$  range = 3.48–3.64) at each wave of data collection. Participants also spent more time with their favorite media personae ( $M$  range = 3.30–3.50) than communicating FtF with friends. An average of 9 hr/day was spent with media, slightly higher than national pre-pandemic estimates of media consumption (Nielsen, 2020).

TV and film actors (28%,  $n = 47$ ; e.g., Emma Watson) constituted a plurality of the media personae cited by participants. The remainder of the media personae were categorized as musical artists (19%,  $n = 32$ ; e.g., Chance the Rapper), social media

<sup>2</sup> One exception was made to the coding rule: Donald Trump was coded as a politician rather than a media personality, given his media prominence in his role as the President of the United States.

influencers (12%,  $n = 20$ ; e.g., PewDiePie), fictional characters (12%,  $n = 19$ ; e.g., Jim Halpert), media personalities (10%,  $n = 17$ ; e.g., Rachel Maddow), political/public figures (10%,  $n = 16$ ; e.g., Greta Thunberg), and professional athletes (9%,  $n = 15$ ; e.g., Cristiano Ronaldo). Half of the liked media personae were coded as moderately low PSI potential (50%;  $n = 83$ ). An additional 22% ( $n = 36$ ) were coded as high PSI potential, 16% ( $n = 26$ ) low PSI potential, and 12% ( $n = 21$ ) moderately high PSI potential.

Coding the media personae for demographics allowed for an examination into the similarities or differences between participants and their self-reported liked media personae. Though not formally hypothesized, preliminary analyses found that female participants were more likely to cite female media personae (52%) than male participants (36%),  $\chi^2(1) = 3.85$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\phi = .15$ ; racial minority participants were more likely to report racial minority media personae (47%) than White participants (17%),  $\chi^2(1) = 12.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\phi = .28$ ; and participant age was significantly correlated with media personae age ( $r = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These preliminary findings suggest that perceived similarity functioned as a predictor of PSRs in line with the parasocial literature (Klimmt et al., 2006).

## Hypothesis Testing

Latent growth curve models specified using AMOS were used to test the hypotheses. Data were centered at T1 to increase the interpretability of the parameters, a standard approach to latent growth curve modeling (Duncan et al., 2006). The normed fit index (NFI), comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation with 90% confidence interval (RMSEA) were used to interpret model fit. Hypothesis 1 predicted that PSRs would experience significant growth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Model fit indices suggested that PSRs grew significantly over time,  $\chi^2(3) = 2.48$ ,  $p = .48$ , NFI = .99, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00 [.00, .12]. The intercept value (5.44,  $p < .001$ ) indicated that the initial mean score for PSRs differed from 0, and the slope value (.40,  $p < .001$ ) established that the growth was positive. A nested model was also tested that fixed the slopes; the nested model did not differ significantly from the original model,  $\Delta \chi^2(2) = 2.06$ ,  $p = .36$ , revealing a linear growth of PSRs over time: T1 ( $M = 5.44$ ;  $SD = 1.04$ ), T2 ( $M = 5.57$ ;  $SD = .96$ ), T3 ( $M = 5.67$ ;  $SD = .95$ ), T4 ( $M = 5.85$ ;  $SD = .85$ ). Hypothesis 1 was supported.

The baseline model used to test Hypothesis 1 was expanded into conditional models to investigate the remaining hypotheses. The first conditional model included the social interaction variables as potential moderators. The second conditional model included the interaction terms between the social interaction variables and PSI potential as potential moderators. Moderation was indicated in the conditional models by significant estimates for slope values (Duncan et al., 2006). The first conditional model was a good fit,  $\chi^2(8) = 11.02$ ,  $p = .20$ , NFI = .98, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .04 [.00, .11]. Decreased FtF social interactions ( $-.14$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and increased mediated social interactions (.31,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p < .001$ ) significantly predicted PSR growth. Hypotheses 2a and 3a were supported.

The second conditional model was also a good fit,  $\chi^2(8) = 6.52$ ,  $p = .59$ , NFI = .99, CFI = 1.00, and RMSEA = .00 [.00, .08]. The interaction between PSI potential and FtF social interactions did not reach significance ( $-.01$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p = .67$ ). Thus, PSI

potential had no influence on the relationship between FtF social interactions and PSR growth. Hypothesis 2b was supported. A significant slope existed in the model for the interaction between PSI potential and mediated social interactions (.13,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The significant interaction visualized in Figure 1 reveals that those who increased their mediated social interactions with friends and who reported PSRs with moderately high or high PSI potential media personae were the most likely to experience growth in their PSRs. Hypothesis 3b was supported.

## Discussion

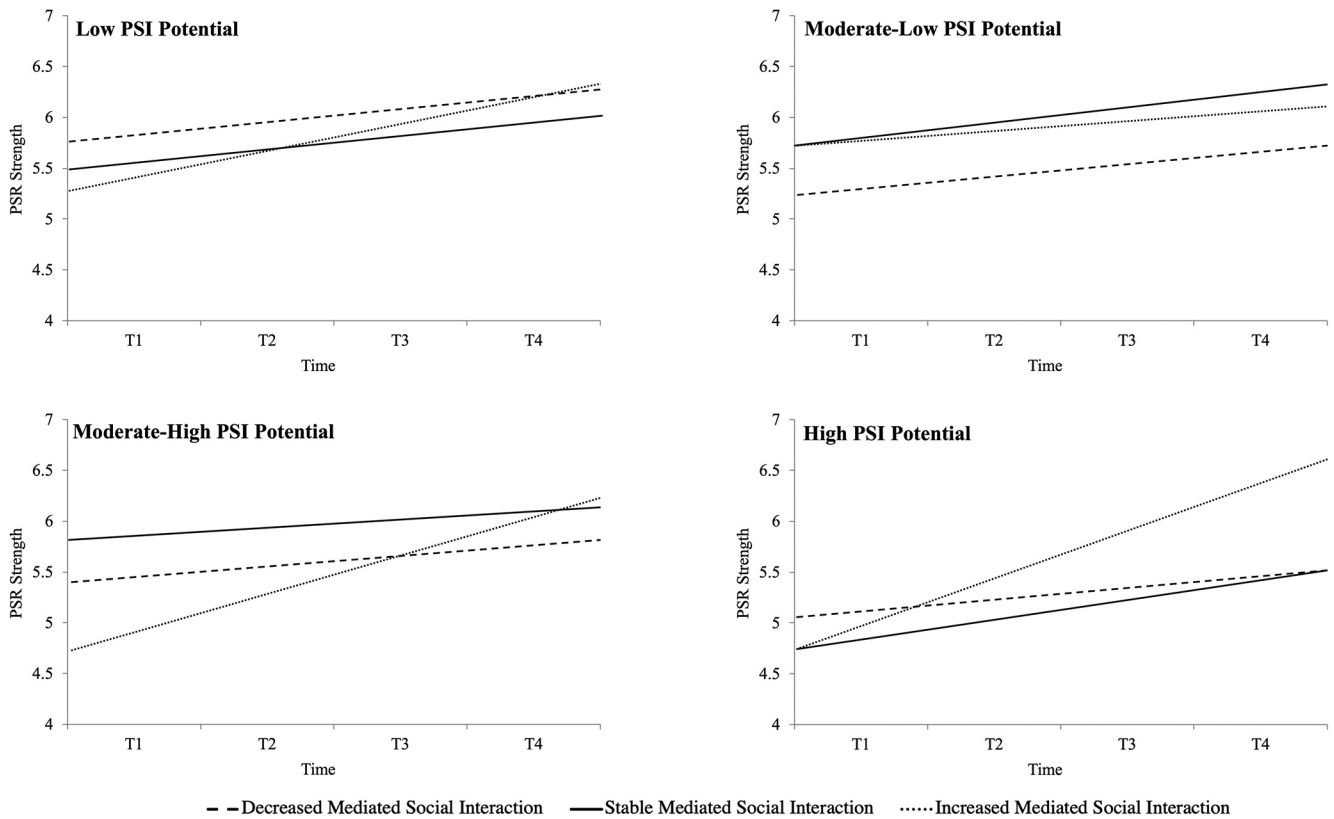
The objective of the present study was to investigate the compensation function of PSRs during a global pandemic unparalleled in modern history. Results of this secondary and expanded analysis of panel survey data suggest that participants altered their communication behaviors as a consequence of social distancing. People spent more time with media personae and more time in mediated social interactions than they spent in FtF social interactions. PSRs with media personae experienced growth during this time, especially if people were spending less time with real-life friends—a finding that supports the compensation hypothesis. However, people were also likely to perceive growth in their PSRs if they spent more mediated time with friends, especially if their PSRs were with liked media personae who engaged in behaviors that increased their PSI potential—a finding that arguably refutes the social compensation hypothesis. Both are discussed in more detail in the following text.

PSRs were most common among TV/film actors, musical artists, and social media influencers, particularly if the media personae were of the same gender, race, or age as the participants. The demographic distributions in the present study reinforce the assumption that audiences develop PSRs with celebrities and fictional characters with whom they can easily find similarity. Though similarity is more complex than visible physical features that distinguish gender, race, or age, such demographics are easily detectable signals of similarity. As such, they play a significant role in the development of PSRs (Klimmt et al., 2006).

PSI potential did not significantly interact with FtF social interactions to moderate PSR growth. Decrease in FtF social interactions with friends predicted growth in PSRs regardless of media personae PSI potential. This finding reinforces previous conclusions from alternative analyses of the data set and supports the parasocial compensation hypothesis (Madison et al., 2016). The loss of FtF interactions with friends could have been supplanted with liked media characters during a time of social distancing when alternatives were limited. Though this finding supports the parasocial compensation hypothesis, it also supports previous studies suggesting that PSRs function as social alternatives in specific contexts (Wang et al., 2008) or among relationally vulnerable populations (Bond, 2018), given the nature of data collection during the pandemic. Future research should continue to dissect the conditions under which PSRs might supplant social relationships, particularly in times of crises.

Increased mediated social interactions with real-life friends moderated PSR growth, especially among liked media personae higher in PSI potential. As individuals social distanced, they increased their mediated communication with friends. Experiencing friends through screens may have blurred the cognitive

**Figure 1**  
Simple Trajectories of Moderated Mediation



*Note.* Simple trajectories of parasocial relationship strength by parasocial interaction potential plotted as a function of mediated social interaction with trajectories shown at the mean ( $M = .01$ ) of mediated social interaction (i.e., remained stable over time) and at 61  $SD$  ( $SD = .64$ ) of mediated social interaction (i.e., increased and decreased over time). Stable mediated social interaction is represented by solid lines, increased by dotted lines, and decreased by dashed lines.

distinctions between social interactions with friends and PSI with liked media personae, particularly if those media personae present themselves in ways that mimic social interactions and, thereby, lessen perceived distance (Hartmann, 2008). There are alternative explanations for this finding: It is possible that highly social individuals with a strong need to belong both increased their mediated social interactions and developed stronger PSRs in an effort to maintain strong social circles during the uncertainty of the pandemic. However, the moderating influence of PSI potential dilutes this explanation—if sociability were responsible for these relationships, then PSI should have moderated the relationship between FtF social interaction and PSRs as well. This did not occur.

Another alternative explanation rests in media as a shared activity. Media organizations developed and/or promoted apps that allowed individuals to watch media content while video chatting with friends (e.g., the Netflix Party app) during the pandemic. If viewers were virtually coviewing TV series and movies, their PSIs and PSRs could have been influenced by their mediated social interactions. These alternative explanations deserve future research attention to better dissect how PSI operates and the potential function of PSRs as social surrogates during crises.

This study is not without limitations. Though PSRs did significantly gain intensity over the course of this study, the results may have been influenced by the timing of the study and the recruitment procedures. The first wave of data was collected nearly 4 weeks after social distancing protocols were put into place in most U.S. states. Significant alterations to social behaviors may have already started to normalize by the onset of data collection. Moreover, participants were recruited from social media platforms, which could hinder the generalizability of the findings.

The decision to use content analytic techniques to measure PSI rather than self-reports from participants was a novel procedure in the present study. Though self-report scales have been developed to measure PSI (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011), they were not used in the study by Bond (2021). The validity of the coding process could have also been weakened by the fluidity of PSI among some media personae. Actors may be very active on social media, posting videos from their homes one week but recluse the next. This could influence coding decisions. Future research should continue refining the operationalization of PSI potential and test the validity of content analyzing PSI potential against self-reports of PSI perception. In addition, experimental designs could be used,

wherein mediated social interactions and PSI potential are manipulated to test their influence on PSRs.

The present study also cites perceived distance as a potential explanatory mechanism for why mediated social interactions may influence PSR, but perceived distance was not operationalized in the present study. Other social psychological concepts such as social presence may also be appropriate to dissect in attempting to decipher the mechanisms at play in the relationship between mediated social interactions and PSR. Future research should investigate these concepts and test their explanatory power. Future research should also continue to engage in rigorous longitudinal design. Very little PSR research has used over-time data collection procedures to investigate PSR development and maintenance. The absence of this type of research makes comparisons between PSR growth during pandemic-induced media dependency and PSR growth in a pre-pandemic world impossible.

## Conclusion

The parasocial compensation hypothesis may predict the value of PSRs in times of crisis. Liked media personae may act as social surrogates when interactions with real-life friends are limited by social barriers. However, when individuals replace lost FtF social interactions with mediated social interactions, engagement with real-life friends begins to more closely imitate PSI. The blurring of the distinction between social interactions and PSI may then increase the social currency of PSRs, especially if liked media personae gaze into the screen, break the fourth wall, bodily address the viewers, or present using other cues that signify an illusion of interaction. The complex relationships between mediated social interactions, PSI potential, and PSR intensity during the rather unique COVID-19 pandemic may disrupt scholarly assumptions about PSR development, maintenance, and utility.

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