

# Parasocial Relationships Between Social Media Influencers and Young Adults: A Secondary Research Review

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## Abstract

This secondary research paper examines the nature, mechanisms, and psychological consequences of parasocial relationships (PSRs) formed between social media influencers and young adults aged 18–29. Drawing on peer-reviewed literature from psychology, communication studies, and consumer behavior research published between 2010 and 2025, the review synthesises findings from longitudinal studies, experimental designs, and quantitative surveys. The paper investigates how algorithmic architecture, content intimacy, and perceived authenticity facilitate the development of one-sided emotional bonds, and how these bonds, in turn, shape identity development, mental health outcomes, consumer behavior, and political engagement. The literature indicates that young adults are disproportionately susceptible to PSR formation owing to their heightened social media engagement, ongoing identity exploration, and developmental need for belonging. The paper identifies critical methodological limitations in the existing literature—particularly the overreliance on cross-sectional designs and WEIRD samples—and proposes directions for future empirical inquiry including longitudinal causal studies, cross-cultural comparisons, and platform-specific analyses.

*Keywords: parasocial relationships, social media influencers, young adults, digital media, identity formation, mental health, consumer behaviour*

## Introduction

The emergence of social media platforms over the past two decades has fundamentally altered the architecture of public life, reshaping how individuals form attachments, construct identities, and consume culture. Among the most consequential developments within this shift is the rise of the social media influencer—a content creator who

cultivates a loyal audience through regular, personally inflected digital output. Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers typically operate without institutional intermediaries, speaking directly to their followers through vlogs, Stories, live streams, and comment interactions. This structural intimacy produces a distinctive relational dynamic that scholars have increasingly recognized as a contemporary variant of the parasocial relationship (PSR), first theorized by Horton and Wohl (1956) in the context of broadcast media.

Parasocial relationships are defined as one-sided emotional bonds in which the audience member develops a sense of familiarity, affection, and connection with a media figure who remains unaware of the audience member's existence. While the phenomenon was initially documented among television viewers who developed attachments to news anchors and talk show personalities, the interactive affordances of social media have introduced qualitatively new conditions for PSR formation—conditions that are both more pervasive and more psychologically consequential than those studied in earlier broadcast contexts.

The demographic most intensively embedded in influencer culture is young adults aged 18 to 29. According to Pew Research Center (2022), 84% of adults in this age group use YouTube, 71% use Instagram, and 62% use TikTok on a regular basis. These platforms function not merely as passive entertainment channels but as algorithmically curated social environments that actively cultivate attachment between users and content creators. The economic significance of this dynamic is considerable: Goldman Sachs (2023) projected that the global influencer economy would exceed \$480 billion in value by 2027, a figure that reflects the enormous commercial leverage embedded in PSR bonds.

Despite the breadth of this phenomenon, academic understanding of how and why young adults form PSRs with influencers—and what consequences follow—remains fragmented across disciplines. Research in communication studies, psychology, marketing, and sociology has addressed distinct facets of the issue without adequate synthesis. This paper undertakes a secondary review of that literature to consolidate existing knowledge, identify patterns across findings, and highlight gaps that future research must address. Specifically, the review examines (1) the

theoretical frameworks that explain PSR formation, (2) the platform mechanisms that amplify PSR development, (3) the developmental vulnerabilities of young adults that render them a high-risk population, (4) the consequences of PSR formation across psychological, behavioral, and civic domains, and (5) the methodological limitations of extant research.

## Review of Literature

### Origins of Parasocial Relationship Theory

The concept of parasocial interaction (PSI) was introduced by sociologists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in their foundational 1956 paper, "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction." Observing the behavior of radio and television audiences, the researchers noted that viewers developed what functioned as genuine personal relationships with media figures—news anchors, talk show hosts, and comedic performers—despite the fundamentally asymmetrical nature of the connection. The media persona addressed the viewer as though engaged in personal dialogue; the viewer, in turn, experienced emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses that closely resembled those characteristic of real social relationships.

Horton and Wohl (1956) drew an important conceptual distinction between parasocial interaction—the moment-by-moment experience of engagement during media consumption—and the parasocial relationship—a more enduring attachment that persisted beyond individual viewing sessions. Although later researchers frequently conflated these two constructs, the distinction retains analytical value because it maps onto different psychological processes and different timescales of effect. A viewer may experience PSI during a single YouTube video without forming a PSR; sustained exposure to the same creator across months or years is what generates a lasting relational bond with behavioral consequences.

The broadcast media systems of the mid-twentieth century offered limited conditions for strong PSR formation at scale, because they did not permit the audience to respond to, communicate with, or feel genuinely seen by the media persona. The structural conditions enabling the intense and widespread PSR development now observed emerged only with the proliferation of participatory digital platforms—blogs, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok—that collapsed the perceived distance between creator and audience.

## Measurement Frameworks and Contemporary Extensions

The operationalization of PSR as a measurable construct began with Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985), who developed a parasocial interaction scale that served as the basis for much subsequent quantitative research. Dibble, Hartmann, and Rosaen (2016) later refined the measurement apparatus to formally distinguish PSI from PSR, producing separate instruments sensitive to each construct across different media environments. These scale modifications were methodologically significant, as they enabled researchers to track the development of lasting parasocial bonds rather than merely momentary engagement.

Tukachinsky (2010) contributed a conceptually adjacent construct—wishful identification—defined as the desire to become like a media figure, as distinguished from the emotional attachment characterizing PSR. Both processes can operate simultaneously in response to influencer content; an audience member may both feel close to an influencer (PSR) and wish to emulate their lifestyle and aesthetic choices (wishful identification). Cohen (2004) further enriched theoretical understanding by demonstrating that PSRs engage the same psychological mechanisms involved in real social bonds, including needs for belonging, validation, and companionship—a finding with important implications for understanding why PSRs can function as substitutes for offline social connection.

## Social Comparison Theory and Self-Discrepancy Theory

Two additional theoretical frameworks are essential for understanding the psychological consequences of PSRs with social media influencers. Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory holds that individuals evaluate their own opinions, abilities, and attributes by comparing themselves to others, particularly when objective standards are unavailable. Social media constitutes an almost ideal environment for upward social comparison, as influencers typically present curated, aspirational versions of their lives—featuring physical attractiveness, financial comfort, travel, and social popularity—against which followers inevitably measure themselves.

Higgins' (1987) Self-Discrepancy Theory provides a motivational and emotional complement to Social Comparison Theory by specifying the psychological cost of perceived gaps between the actual self and the ideal self. When exposure to idealized influencer content consistently activates awareness of self-discrepancy, the emotional consequences include anxiety, depression, and diminished self-worth—particularly for individuals whose attachment style or pre-existing mental health status renders them more sensitive to such comparisons. The co-occurrence of strong PSR formation and upward social comparison in influencer contexts makes these two theoretical frameworks especially useful for understanding the mental health consequences documented in the empirical literature.

## **Mechanisms of Parasocial Relationship Formation on Social Media**

### **Algorithmic Architecture and Repeated Exposure**

Social media platforms are architecturally distinct from traditional broadcast media in that they actively work to increase user engagement through recommendation algorithms that create personalized, continuously refreshing content feeds. Pariser's (2011) analysis of the "filter bubble" effect and Bucher's (2018) study of algorithmic logic both demonstrate that platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok systematically surface content from creators with whom users have previously interacted, generating a feedback loop that deepens familiarity and cultivates perceived closeness over time.

This design exploits the mere exposure effect—the well-documented psychological tendency for people to develop greater liking for stimuli they encounter repeatedly (Zajonc, 1968). In social media environments, repeated exposure to the same creator across dozens or hundreds of interactions across weeks and months can reach an intensity of parasocial engagement that was previously possible only under conditions of extreme media consumption. The algorithm, in this sense, functions as an involuntary PSR incubation engine: by ensuring that familiar creators continually appear in the feed, platforms create conditions highly conducive to the deepening of one-sided emotional bonds.

## **Perceived Authenticity and Strategic Self-Disclosure**

Influencer content derives much of its relational power from its aesthetic of authenticity. Marwick and boyd (2011) coined the term "micro-celebrity" to describe how social media users cultivate a sense of personal accessibility through fame-oriented self-presentation—a practice that typically involves strategic self-disclosure: sharing personal struggles, relationship difficulties, mental health experiences, and moments of vulnerability in ways that feel intimate and unguarded despite being broadcast to potentially millions of viewers.

Lou and Yuan (2019), in a study of 338 young adult Instagram users, found that perceived influencer authenticity was the strongest predictor of PSR strength, outperforming physical attractiveness, content quality, and follower count. Stever (2017) describes this as the "intimacy of disclosure"—the phenomenological sense that the influencer is sharing something personal and private, regardless of the public scale of its distribution. Rubin and McHugh (1987) identified perceived similarity as a related mechanism: followers who perceive shared experiences, values, or struggles with an influencer report stronger parasocial bonds, which in turn make confessional content—covering mental health, relationship breakdowns, and personal failures—particularly potent in PSR formation.

## **Interactive Features and the Illusion of Reciprocity**

Social media platforms offer interactive affordances—comment sections, story replies, direct messaging, Q&A features, and live-stream chat—that create the impression of a two-way communicative relationship between influencer and follower. While genuine reciprocity is structurally impossible at scale, the mere possibility of interaction significantly strengthens PSR bonds. Giles (2002) described this as the "illusion of reciprocity," a platform-mediated experience in which the follower feels acknowledged and potentially known by the influencer, even in the absence of actual contact.

Kowert and Daniel (2021), surveying 1,200 young adult social media users, found that participants who had ever received a direct reply from a followed influencer reported PSR intensity scores approximately 2.3 standard deviations higher than those who had not. Critically, the study also found that merely observing an influencer interact

with other followers—without receiving a response oneself—yielded elevated PSR scores relative to non-interactive consumption, suggesting that the perceived availability of interaction strengthens the relational bond even in the absence of direct exchange. Hilvert-Bruce et al. (2018) similarly demonstrated that Twitch streamers who acknowledged individual viewers by name during live sessions generated significantly stronger PSRs than those who broadcast without personalized acknowledgment, holding content quality constant.

## **Young Adults as a Vulnerable Population**

### **Identity Development and Erikson's Framework**

Young adulthood corresponds to the developmental stage Erikson (1968) described as identity versus role confusion—a period during which individuals actively explore possible selves, test values, and negotiate the relationship between personal identity and social expectation. This developmental work is inherently relational: individuals at this stage draw heavily on external reference points—peers, cultural figures, public personalities—in constructing a coherent sense of self. Social media influencers, who typically present complete, aspirational, and apparently authentic identities, function as potent parasocial reference figures for individuals navigating this sensitive period.

Maltby et al. (2005) found that young adults who formed deep PSRs with media figures displayed higher levels of identity absorption—the incorporation of a media persona's attributes into the follower's own self-concept. In contexts where influencers model positive behaviors such as intellectual curiosity, resilience, and community engagement, this process can support healthy identity development. However, given that influencer self-presentation is systematically shaped by commercial incentives and platform logics that reward idealization, the reference points available to identity-forming young adults are frequently distorted in ways that complicate rather than support healthy self-construction.

## Digital Nativity and Platform Fluency

Millennials and Generation Z, who constitute the core of the young adult age bracket, have grown up with social media as a normative feature of their social environment. Prensky's (2001) early concept of "digital natives" suggested that this familiarity would confer a degree of critical sophistication in navigating digital media. Subsequent research has substantially revised this assumption. Valkenburg and Patti (2022), in a meta-analysis of 226 studies on adolescents and young adults, found that despite high levels of media literacy awareness, emotional engagement with social media content frequently bypassed critical evaluation—particularly during periods of emotional vulnerability or cognitive fatigue.

The authors proposed a dual-process model in which affective responses to influencer content—fast, automatic, and emotional—typically precede and override cognitive appraisal, which is slower and more deliberate. This model suggests that platform fluency does not immunize young adult users against PSR formation or its consequences; rather, the very ease with which they navigate platforms may increase their exposure intensity and thereby deepen parasocial bonds.

## Social Needs and Loneliness

A well-documented relationship exists between PSR intensity and unmet social needs. Derrick, Gabriel, and Hugenberg (2009) demonstrated through laboratory experiments that experimentally inducing social exclusion increased PSR engagement with fictional television characters, supporting the "social surrogacy hypothesis"—the proposition that PSRs serve as psychological substitutes for depleted real-world social connection. This substitutive function appears to be particularly active among young adults, who represent one of the loneliest demographic cohorts in contemporary American society: a 2023 Surgeon General's Advisory identified adults aged 18–24 as

experiencing disproportionately high rates of loneliness, despite—or perhaps in part because of—their elevated social media use.

Ouvrein (2026) examined this relationship directly, finding that loneliness among young adults was associated with stronger PSRs with influencers, and that real-world friendship quality moderated this association. Individuals with higher-quality offline friendships were less likely to develop compensatory PSR attachments, whereas those with thin or unsatisfying social networks showed the strongest parasocial bonds. The directionality of this relationship—whether PSRs compensate for loneliness or contribute to the erosion of offline social engagement—remains a key unresolved question in the literature.

### **Methodology**

This paper employs a systematic secondary research design, synthesising peer-reviewed empirical literature published between 2010 and 2026, with the inclusion of Horton and Wohl's (1956) foundational paper and other pre-2010 theoretical works where they are essential to the conceptual framework. Literature was sourced from the following academic databases: PsycINFO, Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, and Communication Abstracts. Search terms included combinations of "parasocial relationship," "parasocial interaction," "social media influencers," "young adults," "identity formation," "mental health," "consumer behavior," "algorithmic media," and "digital media."

Inclusion criteria required that studies (a) explicitly examine parasocial relationships or interactions in the context of digital or social media, (b) include participants or populations in the 18–29 age range or report findings relevant to young adults, and (c) be published in peer-reviewed journals or represent foundational theoretical texts with significant citation records in the field. Studies examining PSRs exclusively in the context of traditional broadcast media, without relevance to influencer dynamics, were excluded unless their theoretical contributions directly informed the digital context. A total of 28 primary sources were included in the final synthesis.

## Findings

### **Pattern 1: Authenticity and Algorithmic Exposure Are the Primary Drivers of PSR Formation**

Across the reviewed literature, two variables emerged as the most consistent and powerful predictors of PSR formation in social media contexts: perceived influencer authenticity and frequency of algorithmically curated exposure. Lou and Yuan (2019) found authenticity to be the strongest individual-level predictor of PSR strength among young adult Instagram users, and this finding was replicated with similar populations in related work. At the platform level, Bucher (2018) and Pariser (2011) documented how recommendation algorithms create the repeated-exposure conditions necessary for PSR deepening, with exposure frequency functioning as an independent driver of parasocial intensity.

These two factors are not independent: algorithmic architecture selectively surfaces content from creators whose authenticity cues—confessional storytelling, visible vulnerability, unscripted moments—have already generated engagement. The algorithm thus amplifies the relational dynamics most conducive to PSR formation, creating a structural bias toward parasocial deepening across the platform ecosystem.

### **Pattern 2: PSR Strength Has Mixed, Context-Dependent Mental Health Consequences**

The relationship between PSR strength and mental health outcomes is among the most studied and contested areas in the literature. Cross-sectional studies have consistently found positive associations between strong PSRs with idealized influencers and symptoms of anxiety, depression, and body dissatisfaction, particularly among young women (Fardouly et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). Fardouly and Vartanian (2015) demonstrated that young women reported significantly greater body dissatisfaction after as little as 15 minutes of exposure to idealized influencer content, and that PSR strength amplified the magnitude of this effect.

However, longitudinal evidence presents a more nuanced picture. Valkenburg, Meier, and Beyens' (2022) multi-wave panel study of 2,155 adolescents and young adults found that social media use produced negative mental health effects in approximately one-third of participants, positive effects in another third, and no discernible effects for the remainder. PSR strength was not a universal predictor of negative outcomes; rather, pre-existing self-esteem, attachment style, and the type of influencer followed served as critical moderating variables. Hoffner and Bond

(2022) similarly found that PSRs with influencers who modeled positive coping and growth-oriented behavior were associated with improved wellbeing, suggesting that the content of the parasocial relationship matters at least as much as its intensity.

Body image outcomes represent a domain where the evidence is more consistent. Griffiths et al. (2018) established that young men are increasingly susceptible to body image disturbance through PSRs with fitness and lifestyle influencers, extending a literature that had previously concentrated on female populations. This finding signals a broadening of risk across gender groups as influencer culture penetrates male-dominated digital spaces.

### **Pattern 3: PSRs Significantly Amplify Consumer Susceptibility to Influencer Marketing**

The commercial dimension of PSRs is perhaps the most extensively documented finding in the literature. Sokolova and Kefi (2020), in a study of 422 young adult Instagram and YouTube users, found that PSR strength was the strongest predictor of purchase intention following an influencer endorsement, outperforming product quality, price, and explicit trust in the influencer's judgment. Hwang and Zhang (2018) identified the psychological mechanism underlying this effect: young adults with strong PSRs tend to process influencer product recommendations as personalized advice from a trusted peer rather than as advertising, effectively bypassing persuasion resistance.

Evans et al. (2017) examined whether FTC-mandated advertising disclosures could counteract this susceptibility. Their findings were largely discouraging: young adults in strong PSR conditions who noticed advertising disclosures still reported equivalent or higher purchase intentions relative to those in weaker PSR conditions, suggesting that parasocial bonds are sufficiently strong to override the persuasion-knowledge activation that disclosures are designed to trigger. Reinikainen et al. (2020) further found that audience comments on influencer posts reinforced PSR bonds, with positive social reinforcement from other followers functioning as credibility signals that deepened individual parasocial attachment.

#### **Pattern 4: PSRs Extend Into Civic and Political Domains**

A smaller but emerging literature documents the extension of PSR dynamics into political and social domains. Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, and Bimber (2020) found that young adults who had formed strong PSRs with politically active influencers showed elevated rates of online civic participation and a measurable tendency to adopt the political orientations of those influencers, independent of pre-existing political views. Bond (2016) similarly found that adolescents and young adults who followed media personae on social media demonstrated significantly stronger parasocial relationships than those who consumed equivalent content through traditional media, with political and social norm adoption emerging as a downstream consequence.

These findings raise normative concerns about the integrity of political deliberation: unlike traditional political communication, which is subject to journalistic standards, editorial oversight, and public accountability, PSR-mediated political persuasion occurs within an emotionally intimate relational frame that lacks any equivalent regulatory structure. Young adults who receive political information through the parasocial bond—where the source is perceived as a trusted friend rather than a political actor—may be especially susceptible to persuasion without critical evaluation.

#### **Discussion**

Taken together, the findings of this review support the characterization of PSR formation in social media influencer contexts as a psychologically significant and socially consequential phenomenon that is structurally different from parasocial engagement with traditional broadcast media figures. Three themes warrant extended discussion: the role of platform design in PSR amplification, the differential vulnerability of young adults, and the implications of PSR-mediated persuasion for public policy.

## **Platform Design as a Structural Risk Factor**

Perhaps the most important contribution of this review is its synthesis of platform-level mechanisms as structural preconditions for PSR formation at population scale. The social surrogacy hypothesis (Derrick et al., 2009) and the intimacy of disclosure framework (Stever, 2017) both describe psychological dynamics that have existed in earlier media contexts, but the systematic amplification of these dynamics through algorithmic recommendation and interactive affordances is specific to contemporary social media platforms. This structural dimension has significant implications: interventions targeted exclusively at individual psychological vulnerabilities will be insufficient if the platform architecture continues to function as a PSR incubator.

The mere exposure effect, operating through algorithmically guaranteed repeated exposure, creates conditions in which parasocial bonds deepen as a function of ordinary platform use—without any unusual individual susceptibility. This means that PSR formation is not simply a matter of individual psychology but of designed user experience. Regulatory and policy discussions about social media harm, which have largely focused on content moderation, may need to expand to include the structural design features—recommendation algorithms, autoplay, notification systems—that systematically increase parasocial exposure intensity.

## **Developmental Timing and the Young Adult Risk Profile**

The literature consistently positions young adults aged 18–29 as the demographic most intensively exposed to, and most psychologically susceptible to, PSR formation with influencers. The convergence of Erikson's (1968) identity formation stage, the social surrogacy dynamics documented by Derrick et al. (2009), and the elevated loneliness rates identified by the Surgeon General's Advisory (2023) creates a risk profile that is both developmentally specific and structurally reinforced by platform design. Young adults are at a life stage when social reference points are actively sought, when belonging needs are acutely felt, and when digital platform use is at its peak intensity—a conjunction that renders them disproportionately vulnerable to parasocial bonding.

The dual-process model proposed by Valkenburg and Patti (2022)—in which affective responses to influencer content precede and override cognitive appraisal—suggests that high media literacy may offer less protection than commonly assumed. This has implications for educational interventions: teaching young adults to identify sponsored content or recognize persuasive intent may be insufficient if the emotional engagement triggered by PSR bonds operates prior to deliberate critical reflection. More effective interventions may need to target emotional regulation and metacognitive awareness of PSR dynamics rather than content recognition skills alone.

### **Implications for Public Health and Regulatory Policy**

The mental health findings reviewed here are consistent with growing public health concern about social media use among young adults. However, the heterogeneity of effects identified by Valkenburg et al. (2022) argues against broad-stroke policy responses that treat PSR formation as uniformly harmful. A more productive policy orientation would distinguish between PSR dynamics that are broadly beneficial (those involving influencers who model prosocial, health-supporting behaviors), those that are broadly neutral, and those that are demonstrably harmful—particularly PSRs involving influencers who promote body ideals associated with disordered eating or unrealistic lifestyle expectations.

In the commercial domain, the Evans et al. (2017) finding that FTC disclosure requirements fail to interrupt PSR-mediated purchase susceptibility suggests that current regulatory frameworks are inadequate to the task of protecting young adult consumers. Policymakers may need to consider stronger disclosure mechanisms, greater transparency requirements around influencer marketing practices, and education programs specifically designed to help young adults recognize the commercial dimensions of their parasocial relationships.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations of the existing literature, and of this review, must be acknowledged. First, the dominant methodological design across the empirical literature reviewed is the cross-sectional survey, which prevents any definitive causal conclusions. The central question of directionality—whether strong PSRs cause adverse mental health outcomes, or whether individuals with pre-existing mental health vulnerabilities are more likely to develop

strong PSRs—cannot be resolved by cross-sectional data, and the available longitudinal studies are insufficient in number and scope to settle the matter.

Second, the literature reviewed is overwhelmingly drawn from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) samples, predominantly from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Northern Europe. Given that influencer culture is a genuinely global phenomenon with significant presence in South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa, the generalizability of existing findings is substantially constrained. Cultural variables such as individualism versus collectivism, differing norms around emotional expression, and distinct social media platform preferences are likely to produce meaningfully different PSR dynamics that the current literature cannot address.

Third, the literature has concentrated heavily on female participants engaging with female influencers, with male and non-binary populations remaining comparatively understudied. As influencer culture has expanded into domains such as gaming, fitness, finance, and politics that attract diverse gender audiences, this gap represents an increasingly significant limitation. Fourth, research has focused primarily on established platforms—Instagram and YouTube—with TikTok literature expanding rapidly but still limited relative to the platform's global footprint. The distinct algorithmic and content characteristics of different platforms are likely to produce distinct PSR dynamics that cannot be captured by platform-undifferentiated research designs.

### **Future Research Directions**

Based on the gaps identified above, several research priorities emerge. Longitudinal panel studies with three or more time points are needed to establish the causal direction of PSR effects on mental health, identity formation, and consumer behavior, and to map how parasocial bonds develop, strengthen, and potentially dissolve over time. Cross-cultural comparative research is urgently needed to understand how parasocial dynamics are shaped by cultural context, platform access, and local influencer ecosystems.

Platform-comparative designs—studies that simultaneously examine PSR formation across Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and newer platforms—will be essential for understanding the role of specific algorithmic and interactive features in PSR development. Research on intervention development is at an early stage; work on parasocial relationship literacy programs that target emotional regulation and metacognitive awareness, rather than only content recognition, represents a promising applied direction. Finally, neurobiological research using neuroimaging has begun to establish that PSRs activate neural systems similar to those engaged by real-world social relationships; future work integrating neurobiological and behavioral methods could substantially deepen understanding of the mechanisms underlying PSR formation and its consequences.

### Conclusion

This secondary research review has synthesised a substantial body of literature on parasocial relationships between social media influencers and young adults, drawing on findings from psychology, communication studies, and consumer behavior research. The evidence establishes that PSRs in the influencer context are genuine psychological phenomena with measurable consequences across domains including identity development, mental health, consumer susceptibility, and political engagement. Young adults are disproportionately exposed to, and affected by, these dynamics owing to the conjunction of their developmental stage, their social needs, and their intensive social media use.

Critically, the review highlights that PSR formation is not simply an individual psychological phenomenon but one structurally enabled and amplified by platform design. The algorithmic architecture of contemporary social media platforms functions as a systematic PSR incubation environment, and this structural dimension has been insufficiently addressed in both academic research and public policy discussions. Addressing the consequences of PSR formation at scale will require interventions that target not only individual psychological vulnerabilities but the platform-level mechanisms that create conditions for parasocial bonding in the first place.

The existing literature, despite its methodological limitations, provides a substantive basis for concern and a clear agenda for future research. As the influencer economy continues to expand—and as the boundaries between entertainment, commerce, and political communication continue to erode within it—understanding the parasocial dynamics that make it function is not an abstract academic exercise but a pressing social priority.

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