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Parasocial – From the Psychological to the Viral Concept: Dynamics of A Word Within the Contemporary Digital Culture

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Abstract. Cambridge Dictionary chose "parasocial" as the Word of the Year 2025, thus showcasing the transformation of the term from an academic concept to its use on a daily basis due to the ever-growing interest in unilateral relationships with celebrities, influencers and even AI (e.g. chatbots).

Therefore, this paper sets out an investigation into the lexical dynamics of the term parasocial, by analyzing its migration trajectory from the academic and psychological jargon into the everyday lexicon to be widely used in the contemporary digital culture.

Building on the initial definition of parasocial relations put forth by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl in 1956, we started exploring the psychological factors – one-way attachment and familiarity effect – and the social factors – participative culture, micro-celebrity and digital hyper exposure – which contributed to the widespread use of the term as well as its semantic shift.

Furthermore, the analysis of digital communities and "stan culture" phenomenon highlights the way parasocial relationships turn into collective, shared experiences, and how the term gains pragmatic functions of evaluation and self-boundary drawing.

Therefore, the suggested empirical consists of a questionnaire that was administered to a number of students at the Romanian Naval Academy of Constanta, which aimed to pinpoint the perception and the use of the forementioned term in a military and academic context. The results have revealed the fact that the extended lexicalization of the term "parasocial" reflects the language adaptation to the transformations of digitally mediated human relationships which confirm the relevance of an integrated language, psychological, and social approach.

Keywords: parasocial, semantic shift, psychology, digital culture, relationships

1. Introduction

In 2025, several major lexicographical institutions designated their "Words of the Year", which reflects the impactful influence that digital culture, social networks and artificial intelligence (AI) have on contemporary language. As such, Cambridge Dictionary chose the term "parasocial" highlighting the growing interest in one-way, digitally mediated relationships. (Cambridge University Press, 2025)

In parallel, other selections included the term "slop" as low-quality digital content often generated by AI (Merriam-Webster, 2025), "rage bait" referring to such content that is deliberately created in order to arouse anger and trigger conflicting actions (Oxford University Press, 2025), "vibe coding" (Collins

Dictionary, 2025) which describes code generation through natural language by help of AI, and "67" as final example (Dictionary.com), a viral slang term used to express such attitudes as uncertainty or indifference.

Such a diverse selection of terms showcases how 2025 got dominated by terms related to the digital environment and online interactions, and at the same time highlights not only language changes but also how latest technology has impacted on social behavior and perceptions. Furthermore, this thematic convergence underlines a common concern for transformations brought about the online environment, particularly in terms of human and interpersonal relationships, content creation and attention dynamics.

In this context, the choice of the term "parasocial" by the Cambridge Dictionary confirms its increased relevance and validates its inclusion in the analysis of our research on the perception and impact of parasocial relationships.

Over the last few years, the term "parasocial" has visibly migrated from the theoretical field of communication psychology towards the daily discourse of social networks. If in the mid-20th century this concept had a strictly academic status, nowadays it seems to be functioning as cultural label, critical instrument, as well as identity marker in online conversations.

Setting out to explain why and how the term *parasocial* has become a circulating word in modern English, arguably the extended lexicalization process is the natural outcome of three converging factors, namely a pre-existing psychological phenomenon (one-way attachment), the social changes triggered by platform-driven culture, and also the language mechanisms of term dissemination and semantic shift.

The working central hypothesis under consideration is that the term popularization does not solely reflect some lexical trend but it also showcases the societal need to conceptualize new forms of digital attachment.

2. Literature Review

In order to fully comprehend the term "parasocial" we need to trace back its evolution from origins up to its acknowledgment as a viral term in 2025.

2.1. The Origins and Early Psychology

Parasocial relationships were first defined by Horton and Wohl in 1956 as a special form of interaction between the public and media personalities. The authors stated: "*the persona offers, as it were, a continuing relationship with the viewer*" (Horton & Wohl, 1956:215).

This definition underscores the one-sided nature of their relationship initially associated with the television and the radio. Simultaneously, the concept advances the idea that the viewer perceives affection, or an emotional connection with a media celebrity in the absence of any real reciprocity.

Later on, psychological research studies extended the comprehension of the involved affective mechanisms. For instance, in 1968 Robert Zajonc demonstrated that: "*repeated exposure to a stimulus enhances one's attitude toward it*" (Zajonc, 1968:1). Indeed, this mere exposure effect may explain why recurrent exposure to a mediated figure – further amplified by the algorithms of digital platforms – generates a sense of familiarity, which is perceived as authentic.

2.2. Social and Cultural Changes: From Media Consumption to Participatory Culture

Psychology alone cannot explain the popularization of the term parasocial which needs to be understood within the context of the changes in the media ecosystem.

Alongside the mass media development, parasocial relationships were influenced by social changes as well. Henry Jenkins provides us with the explanation: "*participatory culture shifts the focus from individual media consumption to community involvement*" (Jenkins, 2006:3).

Indeed, the transition from passive consumption to community involvement is explained through the concept of "participatory culture". For example, on such platforms as YouTube, the relationship between content creator and his/her viewers gets consolidated and even grows through comments, live chats, memberships and serialized content, which transforms the parasocial relationship into a collective experience.

In fact, Alice Marwick (2013) describes micro-celebrity as : "*viewing oneself as a public persona to be consumed by others*" (Marwick, 2013 :114).
Crystal Abidin (2018) also points out the fact that: "*perceived interconnectedness is the currency of influencer culture*" (Abidin, 2018:1).

These perspectives show that the perception on interconnectedness changes the parasocial relationship into a dominant model of online social interaction. Furthermore, José van Dijck (2013) emphasizes the role of platform algorithms which get the informational flow more personal and increase the visibility of the same online personalities to the point of reinforcing user's affective attachment to structural level, going beyond its psychological dimension (van Dijck, 2013:12-13).

2.3. Expansion of the Term and its Lexical Recognition
By 2025, the term "parasocial" had transcended the boundaries of the academic language and was officially introduced into Cambridge Dictionary as Word of the Year. The dictionary entry reads: "*involving or relating to a connection that someone feels between themselves and a famous person they do not know, a character in a book, film, TV series, etc., or an artificial intelligence*" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025).

Simone Schnall's comments: "*The rise of parasocial relationships has redefined fandom, celebrity and, with AI, how ordinary people interact online*" (Schnall, as cited in Cambridge Dictionary, 2025).

These evolutions demonstrate the fact that the term has turned into a viral word that is used both in the analysis of the digital phenomena and in online conversations.

3. Psychological Foundation of the Concept
The concept of parasocial relationship was formulated by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in 1956. They described the interaction between the public and media celebrities as follows: *"the persona offers, as it were, a continuing relationship with the viewer"* (Horton & Wohl, 1956:216).

Initially, the relationship revolved around television and radio; however, the psychological mechanism – described as one-sided attachment perceived as an authentic relationship – has become much more intense within the digital context. An additional explanatory element is the "mere exposure effect" theorized by Robert Zajonc according to which *"repeated exposure to a stimulus enhances one's attitude toward it"* (Zajonc, 1968:1).

In digital platform environments, constant exposure is algorithmically enhanced in order to generate an artificial yet psychologically efficient sense of familiarity. Thus, the psychological foundation of the phenomenon precedes its lexical boom; nevertheless, the change resides in the intensity and frequency of the experience.

3. 1 Case Studies: Digital Communities and "Stan Culture"
The above model does not stay single but extends in digitally organized communities and fandoms with a shared identity; more precisely, there is a scale extension from micro (individual) to macro (community) levels.

3. 2 YouTube Communities
On YouTube, the parasocial relationship has been taking on a clearer community character, exceeding its initial form as one-sided connection between content creator and viewer. This transformation is upheld by several platform-specific mechanisms.

First, narrative seriality, namely daily vlogs or recurring formats, creates a continuity of presence that normalizes closeness and gets the public familiar with the digital creator's life.

Second, the direct way of addressing using "you", "you know", "I'm telling you" produces the impression of a personal, individualized relationship even if the message is directed to a wider audience. In addition, interaction through comments allows viewers to participate in the construction of meaning, and thus, feeling part of the dialogue/content creation space rather than mere content consumption.

Last but not least, exclusive membership systems reinforce the feeling of belonging by providing differentiated access to both content and its creator. Consequently, the parasocial relationship is no longer strictly individual and unidirectional but gets community mediated and validated which enhances attachment and turns it into a collective, participatory, and socially acknowledged experience.

3.3 "Stan Culture" and Artist-Related Fandom

The term "stan" originates from Eminem's song titled "Stan" and is used to describe a hyper-emotionally involved fan. It is a clear case of cultural lexicalization (proper name becomes a general term). In their study on the formation of fandom identity, Jessica Lovina et al. (2022) reached the relevant conclusion "*fans become stans due to emotional engagement and sense of belonging in online communities"* (Lovina et al., 2022:5).

Also, in contemporary digital culture, fandoms such as the one of American singer, composer and producer Taylor Swift (also known as "Swifties") illustrate forms of collective digital mobilization, identity defense and intense symbolic interpretation of messages. These phenomena are described by Zizi Papacharissi as: "affective publics are networked publics mobilized through expressions of sentiment." (Papacharissi, 2015:215)

Thus, the parasocial relationship becomes a nucleus of collective identity. If the parasocial relationship had already been "communitized" before the emergence of platforms, these merely amplified it, and have been continuing to do so. Accordingly, a transition can be noticed from parasocial relationship theory to the analysis of fandom phenomena and affective participation in digital media, which actually highlights the collective dimension of strong emotional attachment to media.

4. Linguistic Dimension: From Academic Term to Viral Word

In digital environments, the term "parasocial" undergoes linguistic transformation processes leading to a shift in its meaning from academic usage to circulation in the everyday language of social platforms.

Several well-documented theoretical directions in linguistics and media studies revealed that the expansion of the term can be explained by such linguistic processes as democratization of specialized terminology and evaluative resemantization. Concurrently, it acquires an identity function.

4.1 Democratization of Specialized Terminology

Firstly, with the proliferation of digital media, the concept enters the process of democratization of specialized terminology that is concpets form media studies are taken up and simplified in online users' discourse.

In this respect, Nancy Baym emphasizes that "digital media do not eliminate distance, but they transform how people maintain relationships across it" (Baym, 2015:2).

Basically, this explains how the vocabulary related to media relations becomes accessible and applicable to daily experiences from social media. Similarly, Alice Marwick shows that "microcelebrity is a state of being famous to a niche group of people through strategic self-presentation online" (Marwick, 2013:114).

Thus, the term migration from academic language to the digital one (in such spaces as Twitter, TikTok, or YouTube) has led to the loss of its strictly scientific marker.

4.2 Evaluative Resemantization

Secondly, a process of evaluative resemantization occurs which makes the term "parasocial" lose exclusively its descriptive function and becomes a pragmatic label used in online interactions. Such expressions as "That's parasocial!", frequently encountered in digital discourse, go beyond their theoretical framework and function as mechanisms for social evaluation of other users that suggest the perception of an excessively emotional involvement.

This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that "meanings are not fixed but are continually being negotiated in use" (Cameron, 2001: 8), while in the context of online communication "the Internet has

created a new arena for language use" (Crystal, 2006:2) where terms are rapidly circulating and changing their functions.

Thus, in the logic of digital discourse, the language acquires a social function as it is "a form of social practice" which allows using the term as instrument of cultural sanction, a judgmental label (Fairclough, 1995:18). At the same time, meaning is negotiated in real time, following communities and interaction occurrences.

4.3 Identity Function

Thirdly, and in parallel, the term acquires an identity function and becomes an indicator of digital cultural capital whereby its use marks its belonging to an "informed" digital culture that is familiar with the theoretical language of the Internet.

Specifically, "parasocial" becomes a marker of digital cultural capital and a form of symbolic delimitation between users. This phenomenon can be understood through Deborah Tannen's perspective on the recontextualization of language in digitally mediated communication, where meanings are rapidly adapted to new conversational contexts: "meaning is always shaped by the context in which it is interpreted" (Tannen, 2005:10).

In brief, the use of the term "parasocial" shows membership to an informed digital culture, and becomes an instrument of symbolic delimitation.

5. Methodology

5.1 Empirical Component: Research on Midshipmen at the Romanian Naval Academy

In order to assess the perception of the term in the military academic environment, a questionnaire (See Annex) was developed that investigated the degree of familiarity with the term, the assigned connotation (technical vs. evaluative), the relationship between digital exposure and lexical use, and the perception of the phenomenon compatibility with institutional values. Methodologically, this research is based on a mixed method which combines quantitative and qualitative elements through the use of the above-mentioned structured questionnaire. The purpose of this instrument was to investigate how the term "parasocial" is perceived, understood and used by midshipmen, as well as the psychological and social implications associated with it, especially in a military setting.

5.2 Focus on Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed on five main dimensions: (1) socio-demographic, (2) linguistic, (3) psychological, (4) social and (5) reflexive, each targeting specific aspects relevant to the research objectives.

(1) The socio-demographic dimension includes items related to midshipmen's year of study, majors, and average daily time spent online for non-academic purposes, providing a general framework for classifying our respondents.

(2) The linguistic dimension aims to assess the degree of familiarity with the term "parasocial", to identify contexts of use (such as social networks, the mass media, academia or informal conversations), as well as the assessment of its lexical status. In this regard, respondents were invited to assess – on a scale from 1 to 5 – whether the term is perceived as informal or academically established. They were also asked to indicate the connotation of the term (neutral, pejorative, ironic or technical-scientific) and to formulate their own definition of the parasocial relationship.

(3) The psychological dimension sets out an investigation into the existence and intensity of parasocial attachments, through items that target respondents' reporting to various types of figures (public figures, influencers, political leaders or fictional characters). At the same time, the perception of the realism of digitally mediated unilateral relationships and their impact is assessed, including possible effects such as stress reduction, identity consolidation or influencing decisions.

(4) The social dimension, adapted to the specifics of the military environment, analyzes how parasocial relationships are perceived in relation to institutional values such as discipline, esprit de corps and organizational/leadership skills. Respondents' opinions on the role of digital culture in the emergence of this phenomenon and the (analytical, critical or ironic) functions of the discourse associated with the term "parasocial" are also under investigation.

(5) Finally, the questionnaire includes a reflective component, consisting of an open-ended question asking respondents to argue whether parasocial relationships may conflict with military values, such as loyalty, realism, and discernment. This section is intended to showcase the interpretive nuances that cannot be captured by closed-ended items.

Ultimately, structurally, the questionnaire was designed to offer an integrated perspective on the dynamics of the term "parasocial", highlighting both its emergent linguistic dimension and its psychosocial implications in a specific institutional context.

5.3 Sample Description

The research sample consists of 54 respondents, coming from the military academic environment. The distribution by years of study indicates a predominance of first-year students (51.9%), followed by fourth-year students (35.2%) and second-year students (10%), while third-year students are not represented in the sample. The predominance of first-year and fourth-year students provides a perspective on the early and final stages of academic training, facilitating a broader understanding of perceptions depending on the level of experience.

From the point of view of specialization, the sample is homogeneous, all respondents belonging to the Navigation field.

In terms of digital exposure, most respondents spend between 1–3 hours daily online for non-academic purposes (46.3%), followed by those who spend between 3–5 hours (35.2%) and over 5 hours (16.7%), indicating a moderate to high level of interaction with the digital environment.

6. Statistic Results

In the linguistic dimension, 55.6% of respondents declare that they have encountered the term "parasocial" in the last year, while 44.4% are not familiar with it (p. 3). The term is predominantly encountered in social networks (65.8%), followed by informal discussions (34.2%) and podcasts (26.3%), while the press and academia have a lower frequency (18.4%).

The assessment of lexical status indicates a moderate distribution, with most responses being in the middle of the scale (value 3 – 44%), followed by 4 (32%), suggesting an intermediate perception between informal and established academic. In terms of connotation, the term is predominantly perceived as technical/scientific (44%), but also as neutral (32%) and ironic-critical (20%).

The definitions provided by respondents highlight a relatively coherent understanding of the concept, most of which refer to unilateral, non-reciprocal emotional relationships, frequently mediated online.

In the psychological dimension, most respondents (77.4%) state that they have not experienced parasocial attachments, but there are occasional cases reported, especially towards fictional characters (15.1%) and public figures (11.3%). The perception of the realism of these relationships is generally low, with most assessments being in the lower range of the scale (1–2).

Regarding the psychological impact, respondents mainly consider that parasocial relationships can influence decisions (53.8%) and can produce intense disappointment (48.1%), while the positive effects (stress reduction or identity consolidation) are less supported.

In the military environment, these relationships are perceived as having a potential impact on discipline (53.8%), but also on esprit de corps and institutional image (34.6%).

The social dimension indicates that most respondents believe that the digital environment favors the emergence of parasocial relationships, with scores concentrated in the area of agreement (4 and 5).

The term is used mainly as an analysis tool (54.9%), but also as a critical label (35.3%)

Regarding the evolution of the term, 45.1% believe that it will integrate into the Romanian language, and 39.2% consider this likely.

7. Discussion: Data Interpretation

The results indicate that the term "parasocial" is in an intermediate stage of integration into the language of the respondents, being known by over half of them, but still insufficiently stabilized from a lexical point of view. The predominance of informal and digital contexts of use confirms the role of the online environment in the dissemination of the term, supporting the idea of the democratization of specialized terminology.

The predominantly technical-scientific perception of the term, along with the presence of ironic or critical connotations, indicates an active process of resemantization, in which the original meaning coexists with evaluative uses. This aspect is also supported by the way in which the respondents define the concept, most of them preserving the semantic core of the unilateral relationship, but sometimes adding negative nuances (e.g. "fake relationship", "obsessive").

From a psychological perspective, although most respondents do not recognize personal involvement in parasocial relationships, they are aware of their potential impact, especially on the decision-making process and emotional balance. This declarative distancing may reflect either an internalization of institutional norms or a critical perception of the phenomenon.

In the military context, the data suggest a tension between digital culture and institutional values.

More precisely, parasocial relationships are perceived as potentially disruptive, especially in relation to discipline and group cohesion, which indicates a predominantly cautious or critical assessment of the phenomenon.

Overall, the results confirm that the term “parasocial” functions not only as a descriptive tool, but also as a discursive element with identity and evaluative valences, reflecting the broader transformations of contemporary digital culture.

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, the popularization of the term “parasocial” is not a lexical accident, but the result of the convergence between several factors such as: the intensification of a pre-existing psychological mechanism, the transformation of social relations through digital platforms, and the linguistic necessity to name emerging experiences.

Thus, the term functions simultaneously as: a psychological concept, a social indicator, an identity marker, as well as an evaluative tool, and its path from academic terminology to viral circulation reflects the profound transformation of the way in which human relations are technologically mediated.

The originality of this research study resides in the interdisciplinary approach which correlates linguistic and psychological perspectives, media studies to an empirical analysis conducted in a context that has been not sufficiently explored in specialist literature so far – the Romanian military academic environment. By investigating the term perception among the students of the Romanian Naval Academy, this research study brings forward a new perspective on how the vocabulary of digital culture is received and integrated within a setting characterized by such institutional values as: discipline, sound judgement and esprit de corps.

The value of this research study is given by the confirmation that the lexical extension of the term parasocial reflects not only language evolution but also our society’s need to conceptualize the new forms of attachment and interaction generated by the digital ecosystem. Additionally, the study results highlight the fact that the term is perceived both as a descriptive tool and an element bearing an identity and assessment function, which vouches for its progressive integration into the daily speech.

At the same time, this research study is subject to several limitations. Firstly, the relatively reduced dimension of our student sample, as well as its homogeneity, consisting exclusively of Romanian naval students majoring in navigation, hinders the possibility to generalize the results. Secondly, the use of a self-report questionnaire may have been biased by the respondents’ subjective perceptions, as well as by the specific features of the military background. Future research studies, however, could broaden the analysis in order to encompass a wider range of samples and facilitate comparisons between the civilian and military settings, or to investigate the evolution of the term in other digital communities.

From a practical perspective, these results may contribute to the development of digital literacy programs as well as to set in place educational activities aiming to better understand the psychological mechanisms underlying parasocial relationships and to strike the balance between institutional values and new forms of online communication.

Overall, this study showcases the evolution of the term parasocial as a compelling example of how ongoing technological breakthroughs simultaneously impact language, social behavior and relationships. Ultimately, through its interdisciplinary perspective and the empirical validation of the theoretical observations, this study may contribute to in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the contemporary digital vocabulary while opening up new avenues for research.

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