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UWS 58A: The Age of Distraction

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<div align="center">Research Proposal</div>

Introduction

I am planning to explore the topic of parasocial relationships, specifically how they form around

podcasts and their hosts. I am interested in learning about the efficacy of podcasting as a medium

for building up these one-sided bonds, how these relationships are utilized once they are

established, and how reciprocal relationships may also exist among fans of said podcasts. I find

this topic interesting because although the phenomenon of parasocializing has been labeled for

decades and has existed for even longer, podcasts are relatively new and are also continuously

increasing in popularity. How do listeners form deep connections with podcast hosts? Why this

medium in particular? How do the hosts of these podcasts facilitate parasociability, and do they

take advantage of it in any way once it has been established?

Preliminary Literature Review

 The literature on parasocial relationships has evolved as new methods of facilitating them

(specifically, various forms of social media) have risen in popularity. Writings about the concept

began in the 1950s with Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl and have continued to this day.

The relationships between podcast hosts and their fans are somewhat too niche to have a lot of

content written about them, but some does exist and can be supplemented by research about

modern-day parasociability and how technology has changed parasocial interaction. The general

consensus across literature is that parasocial relationships are a normal part of life and that

celebrities can take specific actions to encourage them and can benefit from them once they exist.

The original article about parasocial relationships is Horton and Wohl's 1956 paper on the subject. The pair coined the term parasocial and characterized interactions that fall under that description as "one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development" (215). They also called the performers with whom audiences form these connections the "personae" (216). The case study in this article and the basis for the concept of parasocial relationships in this article is talk shows. The authors discuss how the hosts facilitate a parasocial relationship with their audience by making the show feel as little like a performance as possible and more like a conversation that the viewer could join in on (217). The personae can benefit from this relationship because it contributes to the sustained popularity of their shows, devoted audiences, and continuing brand sponsorships (219). The persona is always meant to seem sincere and real to the audience, and the audience believes in him (220). This one-sided friendship also provides a form of sociability to people who feel isolated, and some programs are developed specifically to cater to those who are lonely; these lonely people are also more prone to "extreme" parasociability (222-226). Furthermore, Horton and Wohl suggest that people may be desperate to learn personal details about celebrities for "enrichment of the parasocial relation with them" (226). Parasocial relationships are as much a part of a person's life as any of their reciprocal relationships (228).

While this original article on parasocial interaction bases its work on a specific kind of program that is visual and meant to look like it is face-to-face, more modern research expands the knowledge base of what kinds of parasocial relationships exist by studying other forms of media. For example, the advent of social media has made parasocial relationships even easier. A

study by Bradley J. Bond examines adolescents to demonstrate how sites like Twitter have altered the formation and maintenance of a parasocial relationship with a celebrity. It was determined that frequent exposure to a celebrity on social media strengthened the parasocial relationship (658). The bond was strengthened even further when a fan had an actual interaction, such a retweet or a reply, from the celebrity (658).

Aligning with Bond's work, Lisa Perks and Jacob Turner explain in their article how social media is one of the reasons why forming a parasocial relationship with a podcast host is so easy (109). Social media also allow audience members to easily interact with hosts and with other listeners by posting reactions to episodes, therefore strengthening the relationship further (109). Additionally, the uniquely conversational nature of podcasts (because many of them are simply conversations among friends) fosters an intimate environment for listeners that makes it easy for them to connect with the hosts, especially since the hosts often disclose personal information over the course of the episodes (109-110). While Horton and Wohl emphasized the importance of basing the parasocial relationship around situations that feel like face-to-face conversations (216), podcasts flout this rule by being uniquely aural experiences that still foster parasociability.

One consequence of these parasocial relationships is that they can manifest themselves as monetary rewards for the personae who encourage them. In their article, Siyoung Chung and Hichang Cho explain how the nature of parasociability makes it powerful for marketing, specifically on social media. Through their research, they have determined that having a parasocial relationship with a person makes them appear more trustworthy to a consumer, which in turn makes the brands they endorse more credible (488).

Research Method

My paper will be based in social science, so I plan to use the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) through ProQuest to find some scholarly articles that are more interdisciplinary (within social science). I would like to have a paper rooted in both sociology and psychology. For writings on sociology, I could use the Sociology Database, which is also through ProQuest. Additionally, I think that SocINDEX will be useful. For writings on psychology, I could use APA PsycInfo as well as APA PsycArticles. When I want to address podcasts specifically, I'll use media studies databases like the Communications and Mass Media Collection from GALE. Outside of academic articles, I have found two articles from the *New York Times* so far that I think are very applicable, one of which is specifically about podcasts and was the inspiration behind my paper.

When I want to address the origins and effects of parasocial relationships on a group level, I will use the sociology databases. When I am doing the same for the individual level, I will focus my search on the psychology databases. I would like to find information about what qualifies as a parasocial relationship and how long this phenomenon has existed. When does a relationship cross over into parasocial interaction? How do podcasts fit the criteria? For more basic searches (which I have already done to an extent), I will just use the word "parasocial" and see what comes up. I will also pair it with "podcasts" to see any analysis that has already been done. I will also pair parasocial with the word "endorsements" to find articles about financial gain from parasocial interaction and additionally pair parasocial with the phrase "social media" to see how social media has influenced parasociability.

I also want my research to be done with a specific podcast in mind. I plan on using *Pod Save America* as my case study, since I'm extremely familiar with that show and its hosts as well

as the community surrounding it. I would like to take some of my evidence directly from episodes or media surrounding PSA (like the website of the production company, Crooked Media) and fan spaces like the Crooked Media subreddit. I have experience with doing social science research in the past, and I am currently considering creating a survey to be posted in the Crooked Media subreddit so I can gather data myself to analyze in my paper.

Motive and Stakes

With the invention of new technologies, feeling close to celebrities has never been easier. That closeness, however artificial, is clung to more than ever in an age of isolation. I'll admit that I'm prone to getting overly attached to famous people I don't know, with a select few of those attachments crossing over into parasocial relationships. However, one of the facts of modern celebrity and social media culture is that many people in my generation and the generation before mine have at least one if not more parasocial relationships, whether or not they know to label them as such. A reader of my paper might want to know how their interactions with celebrities fall in line with this concept and what that means for them.

Additionally, podcasts have allowed us to form these kinds of relationships with people who are seemingly "ordinary," and they make us feel closer to having real conversations with them than ever, making a parasocial relationship easier to facilitate (Keiles). I want to further explore why podcasting, a relatively new form of communication that has skyrocketed in popularity over the last few years, is so capable of making people feel this way and what the implications of that are for the future of this technology and the people who are interested in it. Has our increased dependence on social media and our decreased real-life interaction created some sort of perfect storm for podcasters to generate large audiences full of people who feel a

powerful psychological connection to them? Are they aware of this? If so, what are they doing about it?

Weekly Timeline

Nov. 1: One-on-one library appointment

Oct. 30 – Nov. 2: Figure out thesis and larger implications of that thesis to discuss in conference. Find and read more scholarly articles to be included in the paper. Begin looking at media-specific sources (Crooked Media subreddit, Crooked Media website, *Pod Save America* episodes, PSA host twitters) and think about how they might be included.

Nov. 3: Professor conference

Nov. 4 – Nov. 7: Create outline with scholarly articles, newspaper articles, and podcast sources. Writer survey and post it on the Crooked Media subreddit.

Nov. 8: Outline due

Nov. 9: Write thesis statement

Nov. 10: Write case study summary

Nov. 11: Write explanation of how case study relates to a larger societal issue (implications)

Nov. 12: Write motive sentences. Put everything together as the intro paragraph with the thesis at the end.

Nov. 13 – Nov. 16: Revise outline and put it together as the beginnings of a rough draft. Expand on information gotten from sources and make sure to include enough of my own analysis. Do data analysis from the subreddit survey and add that to the rough draft if it is useful.

Nov. 17: Introduction due

Nov 17 – Nov. 18: Further revise rough draft and check for cohesion.

Nov. 19: Writing center appointment

Nov. 19 – Nov. 21: Revise rough draft with writing center feedback

Nov. 22: Rough draft and cover letter due

Nov. 29: Peer review due

Nov. 23 – Dec. 7: Revise rough draft with professor feedback and peer review feedback. Hopefully I will also have a writing center appointment during this time as well. Have people from both inside of class and outside of class read my paper in order to get their thoughts.

Dec. 8: Final draft and cover letter due

Annotated Bibliography

Bond, Bradley J. "Following Your "Friend": Social Media and the Strength of Adolescents' Parasocial Relationships with Media Personae." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, vol. 19, no. 11, Oct. 2016, pp. 656-60. PDF.

> This source is a psychology-based journal article that was written within the last five years. Its main idea is that following someone on social media makes it easier to form a parasocial relationship with them. This is due to the constant access to personal information and possibility of online interaction with that person. This is an extension of Horton and Wohl's original article on parasocial relationships, as they could not have accounted for the possibility of social media in 1956. It strengthens their ideas about what these relationships are like while also accounting for the possibility of some reciprocation in the form of online interaction. I plan to use it to address interactions fans of podcasts have with the

hosts and how social media is essential to the world of podcasting. This source is

limited because it is based on research only using adolescents as subjects.

Chung, Siyoung, and Hichang Cho. "Fostering Parasocial Relationships with Celebrities on

Social Media: Implications for Celebrity Endorsement." *Psychology & Marketing*, vol. 34,

no. 4, Apr. 2017, pp. 481-95. PDF.

This source is a psychology-based journal article. It was written to address the

efficacy of celebrity endorsements of products, and it examines factors that can

make these endorsements more or less valuable. One of those effective factors is

the parasocial relationship that possible consumers may have with an endorser,

which is where I plan to connect this article with my work. I want to discuss the

products that podcast hosts endorse and how they facilitate parasocial bonds in

order to do this. This article is of limited use to me because it is focused on

endorsements via social media whereas the endorsements I will be focusing on are

directly in the podcasts, but I should be able to use its concepts despite that. It

extends research on parasocial relationships by looking at them on social media

platforms rather than just on television programs or radio shows.

Horton, Donald, and R. Richard Wohl. "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction:

Observations on Intimacy at a Distance." *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological*

Processes, vol. 19, no. 3, 1956, pp. 215-29. PDF.

This is the original article written about parasocial relationships. It was written by

a sociologist and an anthropologist, and its main idea is that parasocial

relationships are one-sided bonds formed between audiences and personae. These

relationships have defined characteristics on both ends and play an important role

in their participants' lives. All other literature on the subject of parasocial
relationships references this article, and I plan to use it extensively in order to
define what these relationships are to my reader and to examine how my case
study fits into the ideas set forth by Horton and Wohl. The source is limited in
scope because it is from 1956, but this is made up for by the expanded research
that other scholars have done based on these original concepts.

Keiles, Jamie Lauren. "Even Nobodies Have Fans Now." *The New York Times* [New York City],
13 Nov. 2019. *The New York Times*,
www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/13/magazine/internet-fandom-
podcast.html?referringSource=articleShare. Accessed 25 Oct. 2021.

Perks, Lisa Glebatis, and Jacob S. Turner. "Podcasts and Productivity: A Qualitative Uses and
Gratifications Study." *Mass Communication and Society*, vol. 22, no. 1, Jan.-Feb. 2019, pp.
96-116. *SocINDEX with Full Text*, https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2018.1490434.
Accessed 26 Oct. 2021.

This is a journal article based in media studies. It is very recent and it is an
examination of the positive effects podcasts have on listeners and how these
effects come about. It references Horton and Wohl's original work on parasocial
relationships and applies this concept in order to explain why listeners find
podcasts so appealing. I plan to use it in my research in order to explain why
podcasts are an effective medium for parasocial interaction and how both the
hosts and the audience bring this about. Although the entire article is not
explicitly based around parasocial relationships, it is still useful to me because of
the parts that are.