

The Impact of Unmet Belongingness Needs and Social anxiety on the Development of Parasocial Relationship Among Young adults: A psychological study based on Maslow's Hierarchy Needs

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Abstract

In today's media-saturated world, many young people turn to celebrities, influencers, and fictional characters not only for entertainment but also to feel seen, understood, and emotionally connected. When real-life relationships fall short or become difficult due to anxiety, these one-sided attachments—known as parasocial relationships—can offer comfort and emotional safety. This study explores how unmet belongingness needs and social anxiety influence the formation of parasocial relationships among young adults, drawing on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Using a quantitative design, data were collected from 200 participants aged 18 to 25 through convenience sampling. Participants completed standardized self-report questionnaires measuring belongingness, social anxiety, and parasocial engagement, with all responses kept confidential and collected under strict ethical guidelines. Preliminary findings suggest that individuals who feel socially disconnected or struggle with anxiety are more likely to develop strong emotional bonds with media figures. These imagined connections may substitute for real-life relationships and help fulfil unmet psychological needs. Framed within Maslow's theory, this study highlights how the human need to belong persists even when social life becomes challenging, often finding alternative expression through media engagement.

Keywords: Belongingness needs, social anxiety, parasocial relationships, young adults, Maslow's theory, emotional connection, digital media

1. Introduction

The urge to fit in drives much of how humans act. Starting from young years into grown life, folks look for acceptance, ties with others, or at least some form of recognition. According to Maslow's model built in 1943, being part of something comes right after food, shelter, and staying safe. Without it, many end

up feeling isolated, drained inside, even unsure who they really are. In today's world - where online chats have changed how people interact - younger folks often look elsewhere to fill that missing sense of closeness. One option? The one-sided bond (PSR), where someone feels attached to media personalities like stars, streamers, or made-up characters. (Maslow, 1943).

Parasocial bonds started showing up in studies by Horton and Wohl back in '56 - onesided ties that kind of mirror actual friendships. Nowadays, thanks to social media, these links pop up way more often, plus they're trickier than before. Apps such as Instagram, YouTube, or Facebook, give fans nonstop peeks into creators' private moments, making it seem like there's real back-and-forth chat. Fans might believe they truly understand the person posting, ride along with their highs and lows, maybe even grow attached emotionally, almost like pals or something closer. Such one-way bonds can bring ease, a feeling of being part of something - particularly if someone's short on face-to-face company (Ravi & Patki, 2024; Lee, 2024). When people don't feel connected, they might latch onto imagined ties without even realizing it. Young adults, who're figuring out who they are while pushing for freedom and testing friendships, often struggle hard if they lack real connection. Studies suggest lonely folks lean more on parasocial links - onesided crushes or fan fixations - because those give a sense of being seen or comforted (Mehta & Vignaanth, 2023; Toder, 2023). These pretend-but-felt relationships work like quick fixes, short-term refuges that ease inner turmoil when genuine ones fall through.

Social anxiety plays a big role in why one-sided online bonds grow. People scared of being judged often feel uneasy around others, so they skip real-life chats (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). When someone's really anxious socially, starting or keeping friendships feels heavy. Online spaces act like shelter - feelings link up, yet no threat of getting turned down or looking foolish. People often turn to parasocial bonds when they want connection but fear getting hurt. Research suggests those dealing with social anxiety tend to lean on these one-way ties - mainly since they're steady, require little effort, and skip the stress of face-to-face interaction (Tatem & Ingram, 2022; "The Roles of Social Anxiety and Parasocial Relationship," 2022). The mix of loneliness and fear around socializing opens the door to one-sided bonds with celebrities. When young people feel out of sync or shy, characters on screens act like steady friends—predictable and safe, because they don't push back (Giles, 2002). These imagined ties bring comfort since there is no pressure to impress. Over time, that ease starts feeling necessary, almost like a habit, which aligns with findings that individuals with high social anxiety rely more on parasocial bonds for emotional security (Greenwood & Long, 2011). Still, even if it fills a gap for now, leaning too much on imagined closeness might make real interactions seem harder later (Wang et al., 2018).

Background & Need for the Concept

The sense of belonging plays an indispensable role in human well-being by influencing our psychological state, confidence levels, and interactions within society. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (published in 1943), the need for affection and connection ranks among fundamental human drives contributing significantly to overall mental health. Despite not being met - owing to feelings of isolation, rejection in society, or an absence of approval - individuals frequently suffer emotional discomfort and seek out other means to achieve connection. Today's technological age sees more millennials seeking solace through platforms like social networking sites in their quest for emotion fulfillment. These sites

facilitate interaction while nurturing parasocial connections—unidirectional emotional ties formed with individuals like socialites, stars, or animated personas in entertainment content.

The need for this study arises from an increasing recognition of how digital interactions influence mental health among contemporary adolescents. Investigating why unsatisfied feelings of connection lead to parasocial bonds sheds light on strategies people use for managing emotional detachment in digital worlds. Additionally, this research underscores the dynamic function of parasocial interactions, illustrating their potential in acting as psychological buffers during times of strained interpersonal connections. The current study aims to enhance our comprehension by combining concepts related to sense of connection, social apprehension, and virtual interpersonal engagement within contemporary technological contexts.

Review of Literature

- **Unmet belongingness needs**

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943, 1987)

Maslow proposed that human behavior is motivated by a hierarchy of needs, including physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization needs. The belongingness and love need represent the fundamental human desire for affection, connection, and acceptance. When these needs remain unmet, individuals may experience loneliness and seek alternative ways to satisfy them. In modern contexts, this often leads people to form parasocial relationships—one-sided emotional attachments to media figures—as a substitute for real social connections.

Baumeister and Leary's Belongingness Hypothesis (1995)

Baumeister and Leary argued that the need to belong is a universal and powerful human motivation. They proposed that people strive to form and maintain lasting, positive interpersonal relationships. When belongingness is denied or disrupted, individuals experience negative emotions such as loneliness, anxiety, and depression. To cope, they may turn to symbolic or mediated relationships, like parasocial bonds, to restore a sense of social connectedness.

- **Parasocial Relationship**

Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956)

This foundational theory explains how audiences form one-sided psychological relationships with media figures. Through repeated media exposure, individuals begin to perceive media personalities as familiar and emotionally significant, similar to real-life friends. These parasocial interactions provide a sense of intimacy, companionship, and belonging—especially when real social connections are limited.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973)

This theory suggests that people actively use media to satisfy psychological and social needs, such as companionship, entertainment, and identity. Individuals who experience unmet belongingness or social anxiety may engage in parasocial relationships to fulfill these unmet emotional needs in a safe and controlled way. Thus, parasocial relationships serve as a coping mechanism for achieving emotional satisfaction and social connection. these unmet emotional needs in a safe and controlled way. Thus,

parasocial relationships serve as a coping mechanism for achieving emotional satisfaction and social connection.

- **Social anxiety**

Cognitive-Behavioral Theory of Social Anxiety (Beck et al., 1985)

This theory suggests that social anxiety arises from distorted thought patterns and negative beliefs about oneself and others. Individuals with social anxiety often fear embarrassment or rejection and overestimate how critically others evaluate them. These maladaptive thoughts lead to avoidance of social situations, reinforcing feelings of isolation and unmet belongingness needs.

Social Anxiety and Self-Presentation Theory (Leary & Kowalski, 1995)

According to this theory, social anxiety develops from concerns about how one appears to others. People experience anxiety when they desire to make a positive impression but doubt their ability to do so. This constant fear of negative evaluation leads to avoidance of real social interaction and encourages the formation of parasocial relationships, which feel safer and non-threatening.

Research Gaps: This study examines how unmet belongingness needs, social anxiety, and parasocial bonds influence one-sided online connections among young adults aged 18–25. While prior research links parasocial interactions with loneliness, few studies explore the role of unmet social needs, as described by Maslow, in shaping these ties. Focusing on Indian youth, whose cultural and digital contexts differ from Western populations, this research addresses a gap in understanding the psychological foundations of parasocial connections. By integrating Maslow's theory with media psychology, the study provides insights into how unmet emotional needs drive reliance on media figures and informs strategies to promote healthier emotional engagement online.

Conceptual Development / Arguments

Definitions

Unmet Belongingness Needs Unmet belongingness desires refer to fundamental human requirements for social connection, friendship, and acceptance that continue to be unfulfilled, resulting in feelings of loneliness, social disconnection, and emotional dissatisfaction (Maslow, 1943).

Parasocial Relationship

Parasocial relationships are one-sided emotional attachments to media figures, celebrities, or influencers, wherein individuals' sense of connection is without reciprocal interplay

(Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Social Anxiety

Social anxiety involves a constant fear of social or performance situations where a person might face scrutiny or judgment from others. This often leads to avoiding social interactions and causes considerable distress in daily life (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Dimensions or the element of the concept

1. Need to Belong Scale (NTBS) (Leary et al., 2013)

Measures the desire for social connection and the need to belong.

Dimensions:

- Belongingness motivation, desire to form or maintain social bonds
- Social connectedness, feeling included or excluded
- Social satisfaction, fulfilment of emotional or social needs

2. Multidimensional Parasocial Relationship Scale (MPRS) (Dibble et al., 2016)

Measures one-sided relationships with media figures.

Dimensions:

- Emotional attachment, closeness and affection toward the media figure.
- Behavioural engagement, following, commenting, and consuming content.
- Cognitive investment, thinking and fantasizing about the figure.
- Functional use, coping with loneliness or unmet social needs.

3. Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS) LSAS; original 1987; recent validation studies (2021–2023)

Measures the severity of social anxiety in social and performance situations.

Dimensions:

- Social interaction anxiety, fear or avoidance of interacting with others.
- Performance anxiety, fear or avoidance of public performance.
- Avoidance behaviour, staying away from anxiety-provoking situations.
- Physical symptoms, sweating, trembling, blushing.

Proposed Model or Framework

The proposed framework suggests certain direct and moderating effects.

H1 (Direct Effect): Unmet belongingness needs link positively to parasocial relationships among young adults.

H2 (Direct Effect): Social anxiety links positively to the development of parasocial relationships among young adults.

H3 (Moderating Effect): Social anxiety influences the relationship between unmet belongingness needs and parasocial relationships. This relationship will be stronger for individuals with high social anxiety than for those with low social anxiety

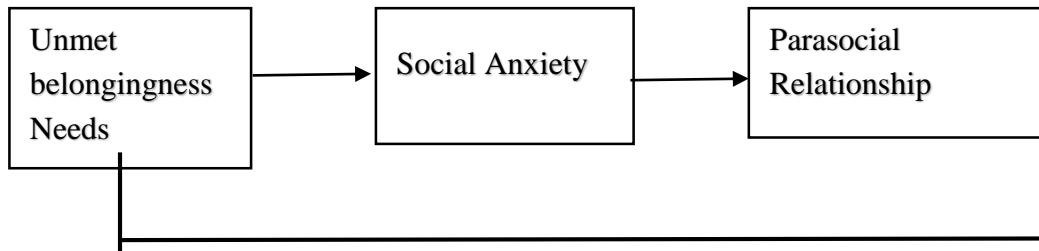


Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Model of Unmet belongingness Needs, Social Anxiety and Parasocial Relationship

Implications of the Study

Academic Implications

The academic implications of this study show how feelings of disconnection, shyness, or social anxiety can lead young adults to form one-sided relationships online. These parasocial attachments may affect their emotional functioning and identity development. This offers a useful direction for future research based on Maslow's need for belonging and concepts of social anxiety. By combining ideas from developmental psychology, media studies, and therapeutic approaches, this work promotes practical and adaptable ways to explore these psychological experiences in real life.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study show that therapists can better understand why socially anxious young adults may turn to celebrities or influencers rather than forming real-life friendships. The findings can also help digital creators and platform designers promote healthier online environments that support emotional well-being. Additionally, teachers can use these insights to encourage inclusion and lower social stress in classrooms. Parents can also be motivated to balance screen use with chances for genuine interpersonal connection. Overall, the study provides strategies to strengthen real-life relationships and reduce reliance on one-sided media bonds.

Future Relevance of the study

The future importance of this study is rooted in examining more factors. These include individual personality traits, the effects of society on social behaviour, and changing trends in online communication that influence parasocial relationships among young adults. Long-term research and studies based on intervention could explore how unmet needs for belonging and social anxiety affect ongoing engagement in these one-sided connections. Additionally, future efforts can aim to create strategies that promote meaningful in-person interactions and lessen the reliance on digital platforms for social satisfaction.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that unmet belongingness needs and social anxiety are significant predictors of parasocial relationship development among young adults. Individuals experiencing social isolation or anxiety tend to form stronger one-sided connections with media figures to fulfill their emotional and social needs. The findings highlight the psychological mechanisms behind digital social behaviors and emphasize the importance of promoting real-life social interactions, emotional support, and digital well-being. Overall, the study contributes to understanding how psychosocial factors influence parasocial engagement and provides guidance for future research and interventions targeting young adults.

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Appendices A

Conceptual Model of the Study

This appendix Presents the conceptual model illustrating the hypothesized relationship among unmet belongingness needs, social anxiety, and parasocial relationships.

Figure A1

Conceptual model showing the relationships among unmet belongingness needs, social anxiety, and parasocial relationship development.

