

# The Abnormal Parasocial

By Camilo Moreno-Salamanca

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This was me a couple of Tuesdays back:

I woke up and opened Instagram (bad Camilo!). I saw a story by Sara Kuburic, known as [@millenial.therapist](#). I asked her a follow up question. She tends to be responsive to her followers. Maybe she'll respond to me.

I laced up my Brooks to go on a morning run (good Camilo!). During my run, I listened to an intimate conversation between [Glennon Doyle and Brené Brown](#). They are in their pajamas and I feel like I'm sitting on the couch across from them in my pajamas as well.

I finish my run and get washed up, I go on Twitter and see a post by [Dr. Andrew Huberman](#). I reply to it. He's replied to a few of my tweets before; each time it feels like when a restaurant tells you dessert is on the house.

Interacting with influencers, podcasters, writers, and other famous people via social media has become a regular part of my life. It has become a common phenomena. The name for this is *parasocial relationships*.

This term was first introduced by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in 1956 and could be defined as a one-sided relationship in which one person (the taker) derives emotional benefits from observing another person (the giver). The taker does not necessarily know the giver, and the giver is usually unaware of the taker's existence.

## The Growth of Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships have been around for a while. Yet, in the last 20 years, they've evolved at breakneck speeds with the advent of social media. Platforms like YouTube and Twitch have enabled anyone to broadcast anything, while also being able to interact with the audience.

Then you have sites like Patreon, OnlyFans, and Sunroom, where you can subscribe and sponsor artists, influencers, performers. Your money gets you access to their work, their flattery, and their intimacy. All of a sudden, you feel like you are closer to this person; you can interact with them and make all sorts of requests. In turn, they'll communicate back, shower you with appreciation, and fulfill your wishes.

We become hypnotized by the mirage that we are growing closer to someone who is financially incentivized to make us feel like we are the only person in their world—or at least close enough to get invited to their Thanksgiving dinner.

Even if we are not economically transacting with these figures, we are paying them with our time and attention in exchange for acknowledgement and appreciation. It is the hidden cost of our attention.

Lest we forget the irony of spending time listening to the advice of individuals that preach the importance of saving time, not indulging in social media (their method of distribution), and building authentic relationships.

The increasing ubiquity of parasocial interactions is having toxic effects on our society. We are now hypercurating *who* we consume from as much as *what* we consume, and in the process killing serendipity. We are unconsciously hardening our identity/ideological bubbles to an irreversible state. And we are unwittingly easing into a world where parasocial relationships with non-human entities will strain our humanity and sense of kinship.

### **Serendipity Killers**

Next time you are taking public transportation, notice how many people are on their phones; rows of individuals hooked on LEDs, turning into hunchbacks. We used to condone this behavior by arguing that people were on their phones *connecting* with their loved ones.

Increasingly, people are glued to their screens binging the latest content from the parasocial star they follow. The video where they share their most recent breakup. A picture of their new home. The twitter thread where they open up about their childhood trauma.

All this time, learning the most intimate details about these people on our screens, and the person next to us could be just as remarkable and interesting. But we'll never know.

We miss these chances at serendipity because we find comfort in the certainty of who we choose to engage with. There is no guessing, no awkward moments, no effort needed to ask questions. All we have to do is listen and react (at our leisure). It also feels safe because parasocial relationships don't force us to open up to others; reciprocity is not an expectation, whereas in bilateral relationships, it is *key* to building trust.

### **Ideological Hardening**

This hypercuration also leads us down the path of hardening our ideological bubble. After all, if you don't agree with Joe Rogan you are probably not going to spend time developing a parasocial relationship with him. So we form parasocial relationships with individuals that think like us and speak like us. It all becomes [mimetic](#) from there.

Once again, we avoid the friction of engaging with individuals that we may not agree with for convenience—not knowing that the tradeoff is intellectual blindness (you don't know what you

don't know). Yet talking to strangers, particularly those who have different ideas than us is fundamental towards humanizing them. And humanization is fundamental for peace—you do not kill your brother, but you do kill your enemy.

## Synthetic Relationships

Lastly, we've entered the era of VTubers. These are completely virtual YouTubers; computer generated and anonymous. VTubers like [Kizuna AI](#) have over 3 million subscribers. Right now, these VTubers are created and managed by some anonymous person. Soon enough, however, these VTubers will be fully autonomous AI-created characters. They will command our attention, our adoration, and our money. And they will be able to exceed the current limits of human parasocial stars. They'll be able to respond to more of their fans, in a seemingly personal manner, engage with them more often, and make them feel part of their social circle.

It is not too far-fetched to say that soon enough, we'll hop on to the subway and see everyone around us glued to their phones, following their favorite AI-managed parasocial star. Movies like *Her* go from being fiction to documentaries.

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I've been thinking of how I can relate to the world around me more intentionally. Admittedly, there is much to learn and unlearn. There are many high wires we need to walk. Parasocial relationships can be positive in our lives; they can even serve as context to *connect* with others in the common world ("oh, you follow Tim Ferriss as well?"). These relationships will not go away. But we need to be aware of the tradeoffs, the hidden costs.

It is up to us to invite serendipity, turn our ideologies from marble to clay, and assess the consequences of engaging in synthetic relationships.

Where to start? Talk to a stranger. For all the flak small talk gets, it will always beat not engaging at all. Ask your barista for their Thanksgiving plans. Compliment a stranger (read cues that they are open to engaging, like not having headphones on). Go to a museum and talk about what you are seeing to the person next to you (this is called [triangulation](#)). No expectations. Just connection. Do one of them next week.

Finally, reassess the expectations we have of these parasocial relationships. They must be a complement, not the centerfold of our interactions.

It's not too late to turn the tide. It starts one conversation at a time; making the uncommon—talking to strangers—normal again.

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## Feedback request:

1) Feels too long, what should I cut?

2) I generally avoid subheaders but I'm trying to use them more. Did they make sense? They help with the essay flow?

3) As with most of my essays, the ending feels rushed. How could I solidify it?

4) Out of the three letters in POP, which one does this essay need more of to be the type of essay you would tell others about?