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## Social Presence, Loneliness, Social Media Exposure, and Para-social Relationships Among Young People in Malaysia

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### Abstract

*Young people are at the age between 10 to 24 years old and their social development is still undergoing a developmental process. The most common social development seen among young people is the formation of parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships consist of conventional mediums such as the television and at least one person corresponding with this mediated presence (Nehra, 2021). It has gained much attention over the past several years. Much of it has been seen as encouraging healthy behaviour. The relationship itself is beneficial in bringing a sense of belongingness especially when they are a part of their favourite media figure community (MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2023). Despite several studies looking into parasocial relationships, there is still a lack of studies explaining factors that predict parasocial relationships, especially among young people. Thus, this paper would like to review the relationship between social presence, social media exposure, and loneliness in young people's parasocial relationships. By using the social presence theory, the interrelation between the variables and parasocial relationships can be explained in much more depth. Hence, this paper could contribute to the literature by providing insight into young people's social development but also identifying factors that could promote healthy parasocial relationships.*

**Keywords:** *Social presence, social media exposure, loneliness, para-social relationships, young people*

### 1. Introduction

The development of technology has led the new media to continue to grow, springing up like mushrooms after the rain. This includes the development of electronic media, followed by entertainment media such as Youtube and TikTok, which can be widely accessible through the

Internet. These platforms allowed the users to share various types of content including live recordings and videos. All of these activities showed that every individual are being socially present online. One of the most talked-about and captivating subjects being shared online includes the topic of celebrities and media personalities. Active engagement and frequent interaction on online social platforms about celebrities or connecting with the celebrities themselves often foster para-social relationships (Liebers & Schramm, 2019).

Youngsters or young people are much more adept at using digital platforms and various technological devices. Therefore, they are prone to develop para-social relationships, including those in Malaysia. According to the World Health Organization (2019), the young people group refers to individuals or people who belong to the age group ranging from 10 to 24 years old. The definition used by the World Health Organization was also adopted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) consistently throughout their research and reports, including the 2020 Report on the Situation Analysis of Adolescents in Malaysia. Similarly, this classification has been generally adopted and used by the Ministry of Youth and Sports when developing the Malaysian Youth Policy (MYP) in 1997. According to data published by the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the total number of young people aged 10 to 24 years old as of July 2023 is 8,436.1 million (Malaysia, n.d.). These figures comprise all gender and ethnicity in Malaysia. According to Chen et al. (2022), around 67% of young people in Malaysia use social media for socialization, communication, information, education, and entertainment. They also use it frequently, around 16-30 times a month.

Through social media, individuals encounter celebrities and public figures, who subsequently emerge as influential role models (Silalahi & Mardani, 2020). These figures often share various aspects of their life, expertise, and personal experiences on social media platforms, fostering a sense of emotional intimacy and familiarity between them and their followers (Saifuddin & Masykur, 2015). Similarly, for the followers, having consumed and exposed to their favorite celebrities or public figures' lives and experiences will change and indirectly influence their emotional connection and familiarity with them. These emotional intimacy and familiarity phenomena are called para-social. According to Kowert & Daniel (2021), a para-social relationship can be defined as the extent of one's emotion, energy, interest, and time in the relationship while the other person is unaware of their existence. An example that can be seen is through fanatic fan basing, where a person may form an imaginary relationship with their idols of interest.

The term parasocial was first introduced by Horton and Wohl in 1956 where they describe the psychological bonds established through the observation of television figures. This creates an illusion for the audience where they believe that the television figure has a real interpersonal relationship with them (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). Horton and Wohl's effort served as a cornerstone for the conception of studies investigating diverse aspects of parasocial phenomena. In the context of Malaysia, online comments, views, and statements have been found to significantly contribute to the development of parasocial ties and increase the value of relationships on YouTube in Malaysia. This supports the use of parasocial interaction phenomena in this setting (Fong, Olmedo & Chang, 2023).

Past researches showed that para-social relationships affect individuals, including young people especially during and post-COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The pandemic lockdown has been affecting young people in so many ways. Particularly affects people's abilities in social interactions (Nornajihah Nadia Hasbullah et. al, 2022; Tengku Siti Aisha Tengku Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen, Aini Maznina A. Manaf & Tak Jie Chan, 2023). During the lockdown, people rely more on their social media for comfort through idols of their interest. This leads to the formation of non-face-to-face relationships between them, and their idols. According to Giles & Maltby (2006), there are three dimensions of the para-social relationship, and they are entertainment-social described as the level of relationship where fans are attracted to their idols due to their ability to entertain and a source of social interactions and gossip; intense-personal reflects on the intense, compulsive, and having an obsessive tendencies level of relationship with their idol; borderline pathological represent as an uncontrollable behaviour and fantasies about their idols.

## **2. Social Media Exposure**

Digital media's emergence has transformed media exposure. Online platforms and social media personalize experiences, allowing greater customization and interaction. Concerning this, media exposure can be said to revolve around how individuals encounter and engage with various media forms (de Vreese, C. H., & Neijens, P., 2016). It's the scope of contact people have with media channels, spanning from television, radio, print, online platforms, and social media. For youngsters or young people, social media has been the go-to platform to interact with friends, families, and even their favorite celebrities or media personalities. According to an article published in *The Star* newspaper on 6th July 2023 entitled, "*To manage children's*

*social media exposure, take a positive approach*”, it is reported that in the year 2022, approximately 35% of teenagers or young people aged between 13 to 17 stated that they use social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat “nearly all the time”. Despite the fact that many of these platforms require a minimum age of 13 to sign up, around 38% of children aged between 8 and 12 years have admitted to using social media. This article also stated that young people use social media platforms to establish and maintain social connections. By sharing pictures and comments on various social platforms, they can stay in touch with their peers and family members who are geographically distant. Moreover, teenagers or young people can join groups or communities that align with their interests or identity, such as sports, theater, or music groups.

To illustrate further, a study done by Tatem & Ingram (2022) indicated that social media addiction is one of the predictors that lead to young people's engagement in para-social relationships. The constant use of social media by young people may expose them to various media personae and celebrities encouraging the development of para-social relationships. There are six components categorized as behavioral addiction which has been classified under social media addiction namely salience, tolerance, mood modification, relapse, withdrawal, and conflict (Griffiths, 2013; Simsek et. al, 2019). These six components are essential for mental health professionals to identify any type of young people's behavioral addiction, including para-social relationships. However, among the six components, salience is the most distinguishing component to express how social media or media figures in general played a crucial role in behavioral addiction among young people. Salience refers to the phenomenon wherein a media artifact (in this case the social media figure or content made by the social media figure), garners and sustains the attention of young people, and subsequently emerges as a substantive subject in their daily lives. The social media figure or the content made by the social media figure achieves salience by exhibiting inherent attributes that distinguish it from other content. Inherent attributes may include the physical traits, personality traits, or even the writing style of the social media figure. Being exposed repeatedly to this content will eventually change the behaviour, attitude, and perspectives of young people.

Various studies on social media exposure found its impact on young people's mental health (Gao et al., 2020; Hong et al., 2021, Shannon et al., 2022). However, opposite findings were found by Fadzil and others (2020) for the study to examine the effect of perceived threats and social media exposure to COVID-19 on mental health. The study found that social media exposure shows no direct influence on the mental health of young adults which can be due to

high media literacy. This might be due to young people's ability to analyse media content that might protect them from various influences affecting their mental health. Other previous studies also supported the findings that normal usage of social media might not have any impact on young people, however having an addiction in the usage of social media can lead to mental health problems (Li et al., 2021). An addiction to the usage of social media increases the possibility of young people being exposed to various influences that can affect their mental health. A study also found social media influences young people's behaviour, specifically teenagers. Norazman and Abd Rahim (2021) indicated that the influence of social media can affect teenagers' behaviour. The limelight and fame they receive from the media platform can change their behaviour.

### **3. Loneliness**

Parasocial relationships have also been found to reduce loneliness and vice versa. A study done by Novita et al. (2023) found that loneliness may lead young people to be in parasocial relationships. Young people may take the approach of easing their loneliness by scrolling through their social media to fulfil their emotional needs. Loneliness can be described as an emotional distress that results from the lack of intimacy and companionship (APA dictionary, n.d). The significant prevalence of association between para-social relationships and young people's loneliness indicates the importance of tackling them before any issues arise.

This emotional distress may happen in various stages of life be it in childhood, adolescence, or even in adulthood. It all depends on the situation or circumstances that one is experiencing. Based on the study by Siti Haslina and others (2021), 71.4% of young people who are stranded on campus due to MCO show moderate level of loneliness. Despite the moderate level of loneliness, the author noted that most of the young people in the study indicated that they missed the companionship of others. This is what happens during MCO where all social interaction with friends and families is restricted.

Mandfield and others (2019) classified loneliness into three categories and they are emotional loneliness, social loneliness, and existential loneliness. (1) The emotional loneliness can be seen as the absence of a meaningful relationship. This condition is often the result of the loss of important as well as attached figures through bereavement such as domestic abuse, retirement, or any sort of physical as well as mental health crisis. (2) The social loneliness is the perceived deficit in the quality of connection. The social loneliness not only evaluates the

quantity but also the quality of the relationship which includes both intimate and romantic relationships. The third classification of loneliness is (3) existential loneliness refers to the feeling of fundamental separateness from others and the wider world. They are often felt when faced with traumatic experiences or mortality.

Young people's lack of social interactions has seen its fair share in contributing to their loneliness. The cause of loneliness among young people has been predicted to be due to the transitional stages of life such as the loss of significant others, break ups, education as well as employment (Fardghassemi & Joffe, 2022). The transitional stages are different for every individual which might lead to young people feeling lonely when they have to face or experience them alone in a particular moment of their life. The effect of loneliness among young people has been found to lead to depression (Lee et al., 2020; Achterbergh et al., 2020; Lv et al., 2022). The likelihood of the effect loneliness has on people can be prevented by the usage of social media. It is one of the ways for young people to relieve themselves from feeling lonely. This leads to the likelihood of young people developing parasocial relationships. Past studies also have seen the association between loneliness and parasocial relationships (Bermond, 2020; Novita et al. 2023).

#### **4. Social Presence Theory**

Social Presence Theory (SPT) has its roots in various psychological and communication theories. It was first introduced by Short, Williams, and Christie in 1976. Social presence refers to the feeling of being present with someone and having access to their emotions and thoughts. Short and colleagues further asserted that social presence is made up of two important components: intimacy and immediacy. Intimacy refers to the feeling of connectedness that communicators experience during an interaction (Argyle & Dean, 1965), while immediacy is the emotional distance or mental space between the communicators (Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968; Cobb, 2009). These components are determined by verbal and nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, vocal cues, gestures, and physical appearance. The quality of conveying social presence cues varies among different media, with some being more effective than others. With the advancement of technology, social presence can be felt even when individuals are connected via online platforms, also known as computer-mediated communication. It is understood that Social Presence Theory has its degree of continuum in classifying and determining the level of presence one has in any mediated environment, and because of that, a

more interactive view of social presence has emerged, such as using virtual reality systems and live broadcasting sessions via social media platforms (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003; Cui, Lockee, & Meng, 2012; Oh, Bailenson & Welch, 2018).

Additionally, Gunawardena (1995) stated that social presence is a result of the participants' efforts rather than being dependent on the communication medium. Due to this fact of interactivity and efforts happening online, the online social presence in a virtual world is felt. Thus, Social Presence Theory has become a fundamental design principle for designers to comprehend user behaviours when building web-based applications and social computing technologies, including social media platforms. Designers use social communication tools to enhance users' experience and overcome the challenges of forming interpersonal relationships in a virtual space. Communication systems being built aim to increase social presence, therefore, social media platforms and virtual reality (VR) systems with immersive features help provide cues for this. Perception of social presence can be influenced by various contextual and individual factors (Oh, Bailenson & Welch, 2018).

## **5. Social Presence and Para-social Relationships**

To move further, it is important to note that there is a connection between social presence and para-social relationships. Both are interrelated and almost cannot exist without one another. In this context, Social Presence Theory explains how media technologies can create a sense of social presence, making users feel connected to the mediated environment or the individuals represented within it. This sense of connection is essential for the development and sustenance of para-social relationships. Media creates an illusion of a two-way interaction, making individuals feel like they're in a social space with the media figure.

Consistent engagement with media figures can lead to a sense of connection or intimacy, even though there's no real interaction. This sense of connection fosters the development and maintenance of para-social relationships, blurring the lines between mediated interaction and real social connections. To illustrate this connection, Wongkitrungrueng et al., (2020) and You et al., (2023) described that viewers on the live stream shows can support their host through monthly subscriptions or gift-giving during the live sessions. The viewers' support provides a psychological connection and can help to create a closer relationship between the viewers, the live host, and the platform being used. For example, the Bigo Live and TikTok apps. Both of these apps are popular among young people for broadcasting live content and giving virtual

gifts. Through these actions, the viewers and the host will have opportunities to interact with each other and create the illusion of being connected. Additionally, by having the illusion of being connected, parasocial relationships can promote healthy attitudes, reduce stigma, foster personal growth, facilitate social connections and coping mechanisms as well as reduce prejudice through parasocial contact (Hoffner & Bond, 2022).

## **6. Social Presence and Social Media Exposure**

Another matter worth mentioning is a clear relationship between social media exposure and an individual's sense of presence or connection in a mediated environment. Engaging with various forms of media, especially those that create a sense of interaction or intimacy, enhances people's sense of social presence. The more immersive or interactive the media experience is, the stronger the connection individuals feel towards the content, or the people represented within it. Similarly, Guo et al., (2023) asserted that the more people feel connected through what they share online, the more they will share. For instance, watching a live stream or engaging in a conversation through social media can create a heightened sense of social presence, making the individual feel like they are part of that mediated environment or conversation. This includes general information about public health issues or even gossip about favorite celebrities, especially among young people. Another worthy example to be shared is about social media influencers and brand presence. For individuals who aim to build an online presence as influencers or personal brands, social media exposure is essential. By consistently sharing content, engaging with the audiences, and establishing a unique voice and aesthetic, influencers can build a strong social presence that attracts followers, supporters, and opportunities for collaboration or sponsorship. A study by Giakoumaki & Krepapa (2019) indicated that to boost engagement, social media managers or influencers should monitor social media for brand mentions and identify brand advocates motivated by brands and social belonging. This connection between social media exposure and social presence significantly influences how people perceive and engage with mediated content and relationships.

## **7. Social Presence and Loneliness**

Regarding the matter of loneliness and being socially present online, the Internet Users Survey (2022) by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission revealed that 40.6%



of young people below the age of 20 spent their time an average of 5 to 8 hours a day using social media and the internet. Despite the hours spent online and perceived as fostering a sense of connection, social presence in a mediated environment does not mean alleviating loneliness. While mediated interactions might simulate social presence, they might not fully substitute for genuine face-to-face interactions, especially for individuals experiencing loneliness. Loneliness is a complex feeling or emotional state characterized by a sense of disconnection and a perceived lack of meaningful social relationships. It's not the quantity of connections but the quality and depth of those connections that are crucial in combating loneliness. O'Day & Heimberg (2021) suggest that certain types of social media use, such as passive scrolling and broadcasting information without interacting with others, may worsen loneliness. However, the study conducted by Antoon De Rycker & Jamal (2023) in Malaysia has revealed that mitigating the mental health effects of COVID-19 and addressing loneliness and social isolation among young people, especially college or university students, cannot depend solely on the use of social media. It also depends on other underlying factors such as culture, personality traits, and behaviours of the users themselves.

## **8. Interrelation between Social Presence, Loneliness, Social Media Exposure, and Para-social Relationships**

The relationship between para-social relationships, social media exposure, loneliness, and social presence in social presence theory is both intricate and interdependent. Para-social relationships are connections formed by individuals with media figures, based on a sense of closeness or connection developed through social media exposure. The constant social media exposure consequentially influences the development and intensity of para-social relationships, depending on the type and amount of media consumed. Meanwhile, loneliness is a subjective feeling of social isolation or a lack of meaningful connections, which can be affected by the quality of connections formed through social media and para-social relationships.

Subsequently, while social media exposure and para-social relationships help enhance the sense of social presence through media, the depth, and authenticity of these connections are critical in influencing feelings of loneliness (Song et al., 2014; Verduyn et al., 2017; O'Day & Heimberg, 2021). Ultimately, social presence helps to understand how mediated environments create a sense of connection, but genuine, meaningful interactions remain significant in addressing loneliness.

## **9. Discussion and Conclusion**

Past literature highly recognises the common development of parasocial relationships among young people. In addition, the emergence of more advanced technology in communication and entertainment will likely increase the possibilities of young people's engagement and such social development. A high volume of studies that focus on the consumer output from the parasocial relationship however indicated that there are still limited studies that discuss the factors that possibly contribute to the parasocial relationship, especially among young people. Considering social media exposure, loneliness, and social presence in explaining the parasocial relationship among young people, these interrelations might provide a fruitful insight into the body of knowledge that is interesting or relevant in the development of communication and the psychology of media particularly in online platforms and the social aspect of young people.

In conclusion, being exposed to social media platforms undeniably nurtures para-social relationships among young people. It creates a platform for connectivity and an illusion of being socially present all the time. Overall, being present online can provide numerous opportunities for young individuals to enhance their health and well-being by accessing information, connecting with supportive communities, receiving remote health services, and engaging with health professionals and influencers who can inspire and guide them on their wellness journey (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Nevertheless, it also exposes young people to the risk of perpetuating feelings of loneliness or inadequacy by constantly comparing themselves to the idealized lifestyles presented online, therefore, meaningful digital connections are a major driving force behind these para-social relationships. Since this paper is conceptual, further research needs to be conducted in both empirical and non-empirical studies to explore more in-depth factors that might contribute to para-social relationships among young people.

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