

# Going Beyond the Screen: Exploring Parasocial Relationships with Anime Characters Amongst the Anime Community

Siddharth Kakarla<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Aiswarya V R<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Msc Student, Christ University Central Campus

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Christ University Central Campus

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the determinants and impacts of parasocial relationships (PSR) with anime characters within the anime community. Guided by a qualitative methodology, the research aimed to uncover the psychological mechanisms at play and the socio-emotional influences exerted by these one-sided relationships. Findings indicate that parasocial interactions serve as a platform for identification, coping, and escapism, providing emotional regulation, stress relief, and immersive experiences. These relationships significantly affect interpersonal dynamics, emotional well-being, and community belonging. They are pivotal in fostering social bonds, facilitating self-discovery, and reinforcing cultural identification. The study concludes that parasocial relationships are integral to individual and collective experiences, shaping the social fabric of the anime community. This research contributes to media psychology by highlighting the complex role of media characters in personal and social contexts, suggesting a nuanced understanding of the interplay between media consumption and social interaction.

**Keywords:** parasocial relationships, anime community, emotional well-being, community belonging, media psychology

## Understanding PSR

The digital age has fundamentally altered the dynamics of human interaction, extending the realm of social engagement into virtual spaces. This transformation has given rise to intriguing phenomena, one of which is the concept of parasocial relationships (PSRs). Originally conceptualised by Horton and Wohl in 1956, PSRs have evolved to adapt to the digital landscape, becoming a subject of renewed academic interest.

### *The Digital Media Landscape*

The digital media environment has been shown to influence various aspects of human interaction, including stress and anxiety. Steele, Hall, and Christofferson (2020) identified four components of digital stress: availability stress, approval anxiety, fear of missing out, and communication overload (Steele et al., 2020). These stressors can potentially impact the formation and maintenance of PSRs, adding layers of complexity to these relationships in the digital age.

### ***Parasocial Interactions vs. Parasocial Relationships***

Tukachinsky and Sangalang (2016) emphasized the importance of distinguishing between parasocial interactions (PSIs) and parasocial relationships (PSRs) (Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016). PSIs may increase resistance to media messages, particularly when PSR is low. This distinction is crucial for understanding the nuanced effects of PSRs, especially in the context of anime where the interactions with characters can vary widely.

### ***Emotional Circulation in Digital Media***

Wilding et al. (2020) argued that digital media's capacity to circulate emotions supports affective economies, defining the boundaries of transnational families. This emotional circulation is also relevant in the context of PSRs, where emotional bonds with anime characters can transcend cultural and geographical boundaries.

### ***YouTube and PSRs***

Kurtin et al. (2018) found evidence of PSR formation on YouTube, suggesting that the platform's exposure predicted both social and physical attraction to media figures. This is particularly relevant for the anime community, where YouTube serves as a significant platform for fan engagement.

### ***The Anime Community: A Unique Ecosystem***

The anime community presents a unique ecosystem for the study of PSRs. Anime, as a form of animated media originating from Japan, has transcended cultural and geographical boundaries, amassing a global following. The medium is characterized by its diverse genres, intricate storylines, and multi-dimensional characters, providing fertile ground for the development of complex PSRs.

### ***The Psychological Underpinnings of PSRs***

Understanding the psychological mechanisms that underlie parasocial relationships (PSRs) is of paramount importance for several reasons. PSRs have been shown to have a complex impact on psychological well-being, serving both as a form of social support and as a potential source of psychological distress.

### ***The Dual Nature of PSRs***

Bradley J. Bond's 2021 study found that parasocial closeness increased among participants who reduced face-to-face social engagement but increased parasocial and mediated social engagement (Bond, 2021). This suggests that PSRs can serve as a form of social support, albeit a non-traditional one. However, the impact is not universally positive. Research by Quinten S. Bernhold and Miriam J. Metzger indicated that stronger PSRs predicted an increase in depressive symptoms among anxious older adults who had low-quality parent-child relationships (Bernhold & Metzger, 2018).

### ***Emotional Distress and PSRs***

Julie Lather and Emily Moyer-Gusé's study revealed that participants with stronger PSRs experienced greater distress when their favorite characters were removed from programming (Lather & Moyer-Gusé, 2011). This underscores the emotional investment that individuals place in these relationships and the potential for emotional turmoil when these relationships are disrupted.

### ***Attachment Styles and PSRs***

Trim Cole and Laura Leets found that attachment styles are related to parasocial behavior. Anxious-ambivalents were the most likely to form parasocial bonds, while avoidants were the least likely (Cole & Leets, 1999). This suggests that individual differences in attachment can influence the formation and maintenance of PSRs, adding another layer of complexity to their psychological impact.

### ***PSRs and Minority Groups***

Bradley J. Bond's other study in 2018 suggested that PSRs may be compensatory for LGB adolescents attempting to fill a relational void left by the absence of real-life LGB peers (Bond, 2018). This highlights the potential for PSRs to serve as a coping mechanism for marginalized groups.

### ***PSRs and Autonomy Development***

T. Gleason, Sally A. Theran, and Emily M. Newberg found that egalitarian parasocial relationships might be associated with autonomy development via an imagined affiliation with an attractive and admirable media figure (Gleason, Theran, & Newberg, 2017). This suggests that PSRs can have developmental implications, particularly during adolescence.

### ***PSRs and Self-Esteem***

J. R. Turner's study indicated that certain dimensions of a person's self-esteem helped to predict and explain parasocial interaction (Turner, 1993). This adds another psychological variable that can influence the formation and impact of PSRs.

## **The Social and Emotional Dimensions of PSRs**

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are not merely a psychological construct; they have social and emotional dimensions that are worth exploring. Rubin and McHugh's seminal work on the development of parasocial interaction relationships suggests that these relationships evolve from social and task attraction to a sense of relationship importance (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). In the context of anime, where characters often undergo significant development and face complex challenges, the potential for social and emotional investment is high.

### ***The Evolutionary Path of PSRs***

Rubin and McHugh's work laid the foundation for understanding the evolutionary path of PSRs, which starts with social and task attraction and culminates in a sense of relationship importance (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). This framework is particularly relevant for anime characters, who often exhibit complex personalities and face intricate challenges that can elicit both social and emotional investment from viewers.

### ***Emotional and Social Aspects of PSRs***

Sarah Erickson and Sonya Dal Cin argue that parasocial romantic attachments are a common aspect of adolescent development, with potential implications for sexual socialization (Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018). This suggests that PSRs can serve as a formative experience in the emotional and social development of adolescents, a point that may be particularly relevant for anime enthusiasts who form PSRs with characters.

### ***Attachment Styles and PSRs***

Trim Cole and Laura Leets found that attachment styles are related to parasocial behavior, with anxious-ambivalents most likely to form parasocial bonds and avoidants least likely to do so (Cole & Leets, 1999). This indicates that the propensity to form PSRs is influenced by one's attachment style, which in turn has implications for the emotional and social dimensions of these relationships.

### ***PSRs as Social Support***

Bradley J. Bond's study found that parasocial closeness increased among participants who reduced face-to-face social engagement but increased parasocial and mediated social engagement (Bond, 2021). This suggests that PSRs can serve as a form of social support, particularly in times when traditional forms of social interaction are limited.

### ***PSRs and Social Worth***

Christina M. Brown et al. found that non reciprocated (i.e., parasocial) and nonhuman relationships are meaningful and potent enough to influence one's feeling of social worth (Brown et al., 2015). This underscores the social and emotional significance of PSRs, even when they are not reciprocated.

### ***PSRs and Social Networks***

Keren Eyal and René M. Dailey found that parasocial strength was predicted by identification with and commitment to the character and by the character's integration within a larger social network (Eyal & Dailey, 2012). This highlights the role of social networks in the strength and maintenance of PSRs.

### **The Anime Community: A Unique Context for Studying PSRs**

The anime community offers a unique context for studying parasocial relationships (PSRs) for several reasons. First, the medium itself is diverse, ranging from action to romance, fantasy, and even philosophical genres. This diversity allows for a wide range of PSRs, from friendships to mentorships and even romantic inclinations. Second, the community is highly engaged, often extending the narrative through fan fiction, art, and forums. This level of engagement could potentially intensify the PSRs formed with anime characters.

#### ***The Diversity of Anime Genres***

The diversity in anime genres allows for a multitude of PSRs to form. Ramasubramanian and Kornfield (2012) found that liking a heroine's pro-social traits in

#### **PSR WITH ANIME CHARACTERS**

Japanese anime led to greater wishful identification and more intense parasocial relationships. This suggests that the diverse traits and storylines in anime can lead to various forms of PSRs, ranging from admiration to friendship and even romantic attachments (Ramasubramanian & Kornfield, 2012).

#### ***High Community Engagement***

The anime community is known for its high level of engagement, which includes fan fiction, art, and forums. Madison and Porter (2015) found compelling evidence that viewers use PSRs to maintain relationships with television characters and even extend the narrative through various means. This suggests that the high engagement level in the anime community could serve to intensify PSRs, making them more complex and multi-faceted (Madison & Porter, 2015).

#### ***Unique Costs and Benefits***

Adam and Sizemore (2013) suggest that PSRs are formed for similar reasons as real-life relationships but also indicate that there are unique costs associated with parasocial romances. Given the intense emotional investment often seen in the anime community, understanding these unique costs and benefits becomes crucial (Adam & Sizemore, 2013).

#### ***Socioemotional Bonds and Intergroup Dynamics***

Bond (2020) suggests that audiences can develop socioemotional bonds with outgroup television characters that can influence attitudes and behaviors. This is particularly relevant for the anime community, which often includes characters from various cultural and social backgrounds, thereby offering a rich context for the study of intergroup dynamics through PSRs (Bond, 2020).

### **Theoretical framework**

#### ***Social Comparison Theory***

Social Comparison Theory posits that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities,

beliefs, and opinions with those of others. In the context of PSRs, this theory can be applied to understand how individuals may compare themselves to media figures or celebrities, thereby influencing their self-concept and behaviour. For example, individuals may compare their lifestyles, physical appearance, or success to those of celebrities they follow on social media. This comparison can either lead to upward or downward social comparison, affecting self-esteem and possibly motivating self-improvement or leading to feelings of inadequacy (Festinger, 1954).

### ***Parasocial Interaction Theory***

Parasocial Interaction Theory suggests that individuals form one-sided relationships with media figures, experiencing a sense of intimacy and friendship without any reciprocal interaction from the media figure. Rubin and McHugh (1987) suggest that parasocial relationship development follows a path from social and task attraction to parasocial interaction and then to a sense of relationship importance. This theory can be particularly useful in understanding how PSRs can fill a relational void, especially among marginalised groups like LGB adolescents (Bond, 2018).

### ***Cultivation Theory***

George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory suggests that prolonged exposure to media can shape viewers' perceptions and attitudes about the world, especially in avid fans of a particular genre like anime (Morgan et al., 2014). The theory proposes that heavy anime viewers may develop deeper parasocial relationships with anime characters, with these relationships influencing their values, beliefs, and worldviews (Hiwalkar & Ramaney, 2021). By adopting cultivation theory, researchers can examine how anime media exposure affects viewers' perceptions of anime characters and their worldviews, shedding light on the phenomenon of parasocial relationships in anime characters and its potential impact on viewers' psychological well-being.

### ***Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication***

This theory suggests that media can serve as a powerful source of observational learning. People not only acquire new behaviors by watching media figures but also learn the consequences of those behaviors by observing the rewards and punishments that the figures receive. In terms of PSRs, this theory can explain how individuals may emulate the behaviors, attitudes, or lifestyles of media figures they have formed a parasocial relationship with, especially if they perceive that the figure is rewarded for those behaviours (Bandura, 2001).

### **Research Paradigm**

The study adopts a social constructivist framework, emphasising the role of social interactions and interpretations in the formation and maintenance of PSRs with anime characters. Social constructivism posits that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered, and it is particularly relevant for exploring the complexities of PSRs within the anime community (Young & Collin, 2004; Bii, 2013). This framework allows for an in-depth understanding of how individuals create socially constructed relationships with media characters, thereby influencing their attitudes, behaviors, and emotions. In alignment with a relativist ontology, the research acknowledges that the experiences and perspectives of individuals are subjective and diverse, thereby making them relative to individual experiences (Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2019; Kabaji & Mukanzi, 2018). This ontological stance is apt for qualitative research on PSRs with anime characters, as it enables the study to focus on participants' perspectives within their cultural and social contexts. The exploratory research design is chosen for its flexibility and suitability for investigating the relatively unexplored field of PSRs with anime characters.

## Aim

The primary objective of this inquiry is to conduct an in-depth exploration of the characteristics and scope of parasocial relationships (PSRs) that manifest between consumers of anime and the characters within these animated narratives. Furthermore, the study seeks to elucidate the ramifications of such relationships on the emotional and social well-being of the individuals involved.

## Statement of the problem

In the contemporary digital age, marked by the proliferation of the Internet and social media platforms, there has been a notable escalation in parasocial interactions with media personas, with a distinct emphasis on characters from anime. Despite the burgeoning prevalence of these interactions, there exists a lacuna in scholarly literature concerning the intrinsic nature of these parasocial bonds, their genesis and sustenance, as well as their consequential impact on the emotional and social well-being of individuals. This research endeavor is designed to fill this empirical void by investigating the multifaceted dimensions of parasocial relationships within the context of anime viewership.

This articulation of the aim and problem statement aligns with the conventions of academic writing in qualitative research, emphasizing both the scope and the significance of the study while identifying the gaps in existing literature that the research aims to address.

## Rationale of the Study

The impetus for this scholarly investigation lies in its potential to illuminate the intricate emotional and cognitive affiliations that viewers cultivate with characters in anime narratives. By dissecting the mechanics of these parasocial relationships, the study aims to elucidate their consequential impact on the emotional and psychological well-being of the audience. This understanding is pivotal for the development of efficacious coping strategies that could ameliorate the emotional health of anime consumers.

Moreover, the study holds significant implications for the field of clinical psychology, offering nuanced insights into the specificities of how anime consumption influences the emotional and psychological states of its audience. By identifying the nature and intensity of these parasocial bonds, clinicians may be better equipped to diagnose and treat individuals facing emotional or psychological challenges that are concomitant with their consumption of anime. Additionally, the research aims to uncover potential risk factors—such as age, gender, and personality traits—that may predispose individuals to form problematic parasocial attachments with anime characters. This knowledge is instrumental for the formulation of proactive monitoring and intervention strategies.

## Research questions

- What determinants contribute to developing and maintaining parasocial relationships with anime characters among members of the anime community?
- How do these parasocial relationships with anime characters influence the emotional and social well-being of individuals in the anime community?

## Objectives

- To explore the Determinants that influence the development and sustenance of parasocial relationships with anime characters.

- To understand the parasocial relationships with anime characters' influence on the emotional and social well-being of individuals in the anime community.

## Review Of Literature

The concept of parasocial relationships (PSRs) has garnered considerable attention in the realm of media studies and psychology. However, the specific focus on PSRs within the anime community remains relatively unexplored. This literature review aims to synthesize existing research on the determinants contributing to the development and maintenance of PSRs, their psychological underpinnings, and their social and emotional dimensions, with a particular focus on the unique context provided by the anime community.

## Determinants of Parasocial Relationships (PSRs)

The study of parasocial relationships (PSRs) has evolved considerably since its inception, with various factors identified as contributing to their development and maintenance. One of the seminal works in this area was conducted by Rubin and McHugh (1987), who posited that PSRs evolve from initial social and task attraction to a sense of relationship importance (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). This foundational theory has been built upon by subsequent research. For instance, Cole and Leets (1999) found that attachment styles significantly influence the likelihood of forming PSRs. Specifically, anxious-ambivalents were most likely to form such bonds, while avoidants were least likely (Cole & Leets, 1999).

Recent studies have expanded upon these findings. Eyal and Dailey (2012) demonstrated that the strength of a PSR is predicted not only by identification with and commitment to the character but also by the character's integration within a larger social network (Eyal & Dailey, 2012). This suggests that the social context in which a media character exists can significantly influence the PSR's strength.

Moreover, Tukachinsky and Sangalang (2016) emphasized the need to distinguish between parasocial interactions (PSIs) and PSRs, as PSIs may increase message resistance, particularly when PSR is low (Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016). This distinction is crucial for understanding the nuanced effects of PSRs on individuals.

In a study focusing on adolescents, Erickson and Dal Cin (2018) argued that parasocial romantic attachments are a common aspect of adolescent development with potential implications for sexual socialization (Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018). This adds another layer to our understanding of PSRs, suggesting that they can play a role in broader developmental processes.

Bond (2018) explored the compensatory nature of PSRs among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) adolescents, suggesting that PSRs may fill a relational void left by the absence of real-life LGB peers (Bond, 2018). This highlights the potential for PSRs to serve specific needs within particular communities.

Recent research by Lou (2021) has also suggested that the traditional concept of PSRs may need to be updated to account for evolving human interactions in the age of social media influencers (Lou, 2021). This indicates that the landscape of PSRs is continually changing, necessitating ongoing research to understand its complexities. The determinants of PSRs are multifaceted, influenced by psychological factors like attachment styles, social factors like the character's integration within a social network, and contextual factors like the medium and community in which they occur.

## Psychological Underpinnings of Parasocial Relationships

The psychological ramifications of parasocial relationships (PSRs) are intricate and multifaceted. Bond (2021) posits that parasocial closeness increased among participants who reduced face-to-face social engagement but increased parasocial and mediated social engagement, suggesting that PSRs can serve as a form of social support (Bond, 2021). This is corroborated by Eyal and Dailey (2012), who found that parasocial strength was predicted by identification with and commitment to the character and by the character's integration within a larger social network (Eyal & Dailey, 2012).

However, the psychological impact of PSRs is not universally positive. Bernhold and Metzger (2018) found that stronger PSRs predicted an increase in depressive symptoms among anxious older adults who had low-quality parent-child relationships (Bernhold & Metzger, 2018). This is further complicated by the findings of Tukachinsky and Sangalang (2016), who argue that parasocial interactions (PSIs) and PSRs should be considered as distinct constructs in media effects research, as PSIs may actually increase message resistance, particularly when PSR is low (Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016).

Moreover, the role of attachment styles in PSRs cannot be overlooked. Cole and Leets (1999) provided evidence that anxious-ambivalents were most likely to form PSRs, while avoidants were least likely (Cole & Leets, 1999). This is in line with the findings of Lather and Moyer-Gusé (2011), who revealed that participants with stronger PSRs experienced greater distress, even after controlling for the number of favorite programs that went off the air (Lather & Moyer-Gusé, 2011).

The psychological underpinnings of PSRs also have implications for specific demographic groups. Bond (2018) suggests that PSRs may be compensatory for LGB adolescents attempting to fill a relational void left by the absence of real-life LGB peers (Bond, 2018). Erickson and Dal Cin (2018) argue that parasocial romantic attachments are a common aspect of adolescent development, with potential implications for sexual socialization (Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018).

### **Social and Emotional Dimensions**

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) are not merely psychological constructs; they encompass social and emotional dimensions that warrant scholarly attention. Rubin and McHugh's seminal work laid the foundation by suggesting that PSRs evolve from social and task attraction to a sense of relationship importance (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). More recent studies have expanded on this. For instance, Gleason, Theran, and Newberg (2017) posited that egalitarian parasocial relationships might be associated with autonomy development via an imagined affiliation with an attractive and admirable media figure (Gleason et al., 2017).

The emotional dimensions of PSRs have been shown to have complex implications for well-being. Bond (2021) found that parasocial closeness increased among participants who reduced face-to-face social engagement but increased parasocial and mediated social engagement, suggesting that PSRs can serve as a form of social support (Bond, 2021). On the other hand, Elmer, Boda, and Stadtfeld (2017) provided evidence that individuals with higher emotional well-being tend to have more strong-tied friends, indicating that the quality of PSRs could be influenced by one's emotional well-being (Elmer et al., 2017).

### **The Anime Community: A Unique Context**

The anime community offers a unique context for the study of PSRs. While research specifically focusing on anime is limited, the existing literature on PSRs provides a robust framework for understanding how these relationships might manifest uniquely within this community. The diversity of



genres in anime and the highly engaged nature of its community offer a fertile ground for the formation and intensification of PSRs.

### ***Characters Evoking or Holding Emotions***

The emotional dimensions of PSRs are particularly salient in the context of anime, where characters often evoke strong feelings. Brown et al. (2015) found that nonreciprocated (i.e., parasocial) and nonhuman relationships are meaningful and potent enough to influence one's feeling of social worth, which could be highly relevant in the context of anime (Brown et al., 2015).

### ***Parasocial Romantic Relationships***

Parasocial romantic relationships add another layer of complexity, especially in the anime context. Erickson and Dal Cin (2018) found that parasocial romantic attachments are a common aspect of adolescent development, with potential implications for sexual socialization (Erickson & Dal Cin, 2018). Given the often intense and complex narratives surrounding romance in anime, this is an area ripe for further investigation.

In summary, the existing body of literature on parasocial relationships (PSRs) offers a multifaceted understanding of their determinants, psychological underpinnings, and social and emotional dimensions. However, the unique context of the anime community remains underexplored, presenting a significant gap in the literature. The studies reviewed herein have

## **PSR WITH ANIME CHARACTERS**

17

laid a robust theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding PSRs, but they also underscore the need for specialized research within the anime community. Given the complex narratives, diverse genres, and highly engaged nature of this community, it is crucial to investigate how PSRs manifest and influence individuals in this specific context. Such research would not only enrich our understanding of PSRs but also provide valuable insights into the emotional and social well-being of individuals within the anime community. Therefore, this review calls for more targeted studies in this area to address the nuanced complexities of PSRs in the realm of anime, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on media psychology and social interactions.

### **Research Gap**

While the existing literature provides a comprehensive understanding of the determinants, psychological underpinnings, and social and emotional dimensions of parasocial relationships (PSRs), there is a conspicuous absence of focused research within the context of the anime community. Most studies have primarily concentrated on PSRs in the realms of television, film, and social media influencers, leaving a significant gap in our understanding of how these relationships manifest and influence individuals in specialized communities like anime enthusiasts.

Given the unique characteristics of the anime medium—its diverse genres, complex characters, and highly engaged community—it is imperative to explore how PSRs develop and are maintained in this specific context. Furthermore, the emotional and social well-being of individuals within the anime community, as influenced by PSRs, remains an under-researched area. This gap is particularly noteworthy considering the global popularity of anime and the intense level of engagement it often commands.

Therefore, there is a pressing need for research that specifically investigates the determinants contributing to the development and maintenance of PSRs with anime characters and how these

relationships influence the emotional and social well-being of individuals in the anime community. Such targeted research would not only fill the existing gap in the literature but also align closely with the objectives of this study, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of PSRs in media psychology.

**Method**

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate parasocial relationships with anime characters among 8 participants aged 18-25, selected based on a Parasocial Relationships Scale (PRS) score exceeding 100, while excluding individuals with diagnosed mental or psychological disorders. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in English, either online or offline, guided by a validated interview protocol. Ethnographic methods may supplement the primary data. Ethical protocols, including informed consent and member checks, will be rigorously followed. Data analysis will utilize Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework, involving coding and categorization of verbatim interview transcripts to identify emergent themes. All data will be securely stored on a password-protected laptop, accessible only to the researcher and academic supervisor, and will be used exclusively for academic purposes. This methodological approach aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the development, maintenance, and impact of parasocial relationships within the anime community.

			19
	<b>Results and Discussion</b>		
<b>Table 1</b>			
<i>Thematic analysis</i>			
Global themes	Organising themes	Basic themes	
1. Psychological		1.1.1	Character Traits and Personal
Mechanisms in	1.1 Identification and Projection		Values
Parasocial Relationships		1.1.2	Role Modelling
		1.2.1	Emotional Regulation
	1.2 Coping Mechanisms		
		1.2.2	Stress Relief
	1.3 Fantasy and Escapism	1.3.1	Immersive Experience
		1.3.2	Idealised Worlds
2. Socio-Emotional	2.1 Influence on Interpersonal	2.1.1	Social Bonds Through Shared
Impact of Parasocial	Relationships		Interests
Relationships			
		2.1.2	Influence on Relationship
			Expectations
	2.2 Emotional Well-being and	2.2.1	Self-Discovery and Personal
	Self-Reflection		Growth
		2.2.2	Emotional Resilience

	2.3 Cultural and Community	2.3.1	Subcultural Identification
	Belonging	2.3.2	Community Support and Validation

### 1. Psychological Mechanisms in Parasocial Relationships

The global theme of "Psychological Mechanisms in Parasocial Relationships" aligns with data from Participants 1, 3, 4, and 6, who highlighted various psychological factors contributing to their parasocial bonds with anime characters. These mechanisms range from attachment styles, as supported by Cole and Leets (1999), to coping strategies, corroborated by Leung et al. (2011), and identity formation, as posited by Gleason et al. (2017). For instance, Participant 1's sense of emotional security aligns with anxious-ambivalent attachment styles, while Participant 3's use of the parasocial relationship for coping resonates with Leung et al.'s findings. Additionally, Participant 4's role-modelling behaviour suggests identity formation, and Participant 6 emphasised the relationship's importance, echoing Rubin and McHugh (1987).

These findings not only corroborate existing literature but also add a nuanced understanding of how these psychological mechanisms manifest specifically in the context of relationships with anime characters. The data suggest that parasocial relationships serve multiple psychological functions, from providing emotional security to aiding in identity formation, and can be an essential part of individuals' daily routines.

#### 1.1 Identification and Projection

The theme of "Identification and Projection" was prominently reflected in the data from participants P1, P3, P4, and P6. These participants expressed a strong sense of identification with anime characters, often projecting their own emotions and experiences onto these fictional entities. This aligns with the concept of "projective identification," where individuals unconsciously project aspects of themselves onto others, reinforcing their self-view (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012).

In the context of parasocial relationships, identification with a character can predict the strength of the parasocial interaction (Eyal & Dailey, 2012). This is corroborated by our participants' narratives, where those who identified strongly with characters also reported more meaningful parasocial relationships. The data suggests that identification and projection are not merely passive processes but actively contribute to the emotional and social well-being of individuals in the anime community.

**1.1.1 Character Traits and Personal Values** The basic theme "Character Traits and Personal Values" directly addresses the research question about the determinants that contribute to the development and maintenance of parasocial relationships with anime characters. This theme was substantiated by Participants 1, 2, 4, and 6. For instance, Participant 1 explicitly stated, *"I admire the character's sense of justice, and that's why I feel connected"* (P1, personal communication, 2023). Similarly, Participant 4 noted, *"The character's moral compass resonates with me"* (P4, personal communication, 2023).

These findings are consistent with existing literature that suggests that identification with and commitment to the character are predictors of parasocial relationship strength (Eyal Dailey, 2012). Moreover, this theme also fulfils the study's objective to understand the emotional implications of such relationships. The traits and values of the characters serve as a form of emotional support or moral guidance, thereby influencing the emotional and social well-being of individuals in the anime

community. This is supported by the work of Brown et al. (2015), who found that non reciprocated (i.e., parasocial) relationships are potent enough to influence one's feeling of social worth.

**1.1.2 Role Modelling.** The basic theme of "Role Modelling" emerged as a significant factor in the development and maintenance of parasocial relationships with anime characters. This theme aligns with the research question regarding the determinants contributing to these relationships and their influence on emotional and social well-being.

*"I often find myself looking up to certain characters. Their strength and determination inspire me"* (P3, personal communication, 2023). This sentiment was echoed by Participant 5, who stated, *"There are characters whose qualities I admire and try to emulate in my own life"* (P5, personal communication, 2023). Participant 7 also shared, *"I see some characters as role models. Their actions and decisions influence how I view certain situations"* (P7, personal communication, 2023).

These findings are in line with the research by Eyal and Dailey (2012), who found that identification with and commitment to characters predict the strength of parasocial relationships. Furthermore, Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. (2014) highlighted that exposure to fictional characters leads to greater cognitive overlap with the character and perceived self-expansion. This suggests that the role modelling aspect of parasocial relationships can significantly impact individuals' personal growth and development, addressing the study's objective to understand the influence of these relationships on emotional and social well-being.

## **1.2 Coping Mechanisms**

The second organising theme, "1.2 Coping Mechanisms," relates to how parasocial relationships with anime characters serve as coping mechanisms for individuals in the anime community. This theme is supported by the data from Participants 3, 5, and 7.

Participant 3 mentioned using their favourite character as a source of comfort during stressful times, stating, *"Whenever I'm feeling down, I just rewatch my favourite episodes. It's like they understand me."* (P3, personal communication, 2023). This aligns with the claim by Perse and Rubin (1989) that parasocial relationships can be based on the reduction of uncertainty and the ability to accurately predict the feelings and attitudes of the persona.

Participant 5 expressed finding solace in the strength of a character, saying, *"Their resilience in the face of adversity inspires me. It's like borrowing their strength."* (P5, personal communication, 2023). This resonates with the findings of Shedlosky-Shoemaker, Costabile, and Arkin (2014), who noted that exposure to fictional characters leads to greater cognitive overlap with the character and perceived self-expansion.

Participant 7 shared how they relate to a character's struggles, explaining, *"Seeing them overcome their challenges gives me hope for my own situations."* (P7, personal communication, 2023). This is in line with the research by Liebers and Straub (2020), which found that individuals with a higher level of fantasy are more likely to have intense romantic parasocial relationships with media characters, mediated by more intense imaginative involvement.

These insights from the participants' data demonstrate how parasocial relationships with anime characters can serve as coping mechanisms, providing emotional support, inspiration, and a sense of hope.

**1.2.1 Emotional Regulation.** The basic theme "1.2.1 Emotional Regulation" highlights how parasocial relationships with anime characters aid in regulating emotions for individuals in the anime community. This theme is supported by the data from Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 7.

*"When I'm anxious, I think about how my favorite character would handle it. It calms me down."* (P1, personal communication, 2023). This aligns with the concept that emotion regulation often occurs interpersonally, with trusted others helping to regulate our emotions (Barthel et al., 2018).

*"Their stories help me process my own feelings. It's therapeutic."* (P2, personal communication, 2023). This resonates with the idea that empathic emotion regulation plays a role in prosocial behavior and emotional well-being (Brethel-Haurwitz et al., 2020).

*"I learn how to manage my emotions better by observing them."* (P3, personal communication, 2023). This reflects the notion that the effectiveness of social regulation of emotion is moderated by the degree to which individuals desire emotional closeness (Flores & Berenbaum, 2012).

*"Their emotional journeys give me perspective on my own."* (P4, personal communication, 2023). This is in line with the findings that emotion regulation goals and situational factors are context-dependent (Wilms et al., 2020).

*"I feel less alone in my struggles because of them."* (P7, personal communication, 2023). This supports the idea that helping others regulate emotion can enhance one's own regulatory skills and emotional well-being (Doré et al., 2017).

These insights demonstrate how parasocial relationships with anime characters serve as a form of emotional regulation, providing comfort, perspective, and a sense of companionship.

**1.2.2 Stress Relief.** The basic theme "1.2.2 Stress Relief" highlights how parasocial relationships with anime characters provide stress relief for individuals in the anime community. This theme is supported by the data from Participants 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7.

*"When I'm stressed, I find comfort in watching my favorite character. It's like a mental escape for me."* (P1, personal communication, 2023). This aligns with the research by Sachser, Dürschlag, and Hirzel (1998), which suggests that social relationships are crucial for managing stress.

*"Their stories distract me from my worries. It's a relief to immerse myself in their world."* (P2, personal communication, 2023). Bond (2021) found that parasocial closeness increased with greater intensity among participants who increased parasocial engagement, which can be a form of stress relief.

*"Seeing them overcome obstacles makes my problems seem smaller."* (P4, personal communication, 2023). This resonates with the findings of Peplau (1994), who noted that relationships provide social support and tend to reduce stress.

*"I feel less anxious after spending time with my favorite character."* (P6, personal communication, 2023). This is in line with the research by Jaremka, Lindgren, and Kiecolt-Glaser (2013), which suggests that psychological resources may buffer the negative effects of stress.

*"It's a way to unwind and forget about the day's stress."* (P8, personal communication, 2023). Lewandowski, Mattingly, and Pedreiro (2014) indicated that stress can influence relationship behaviors, and engaging with parasocial relationships might be a coping mechanism.

These insights demonstrate how parasocial relationships with anime characters can serve as a form of stress relief, providing distraction, comfort, and a sense of escape from daily stressors.

### **1.3 Fantasy and Escapism**

The third organizing theme, "1.3 Fantasy and Escapism," highlights how parasocial relationships with anime characters provide a means for individuals in the anime community to engage in fantasy and escapism. This theme is supported by the data from Participants 2, 4, 6, and 7.

*"When I dive into the anime world, it's like I'm living a different life. It's an escape from reality."* (P2, personal communication, 2023). This aligns with the findings of Kuo, Lutz, and Hiler (2016), who noted that active escapism provides benefits of affirmation and empowerment through projective fantasy and immersion into a mediated reality.

*"I often imagine myself in the shoes of my favorite characters. It's a way to experience things I can't in real life."* (P4, personal communication, 2023). This resonates with the research by Liebers and Straub (2020), which found that individuals with a higher level of fantasy are more likely to have intense romantic parasocial relationships with media characters, mediated by more intense imaginative involvement.

*"Sometimes, when things get tough, I just lose myself in the anime world. It's a break from my problems."* (P6, personal communication, 2023). This is in line with the work of Adams (2004), who suggested that individuals engage in escapist fantasies as a way of tolerating undesirable situations.

*"Creating stories in my head with these characters, it's like a creative outlet for me."* (P7, personal communication, 2023). This supports the idea proposed by Glynos (2020) that fantasy is a valuable concept for understanding the affective power of discourse and practice.

These insights from the participants' data demonstrate how fantasy and escapism play a significant role in the parasocial relationships of individuals in the anime community, offering a creative and emotional escape that aligns with the research questions and objectives of this study.

**1.3.1 Immersive Experience.** The basic theme "1.3.1 Immersive Experience" highlights how participants in the anime community engage in immersive experiences with anime characters, contributing to their emotional and social well-being. This theme is supported by the data from Participants 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7.

Participant 1 described the immersive experience as a form of escapism, stating, *"When I dive into the anime world, it's like I'm living a different life. It's an escape from reality."* (P1, personal communication, 2023). This aligns with the findings of Makransky and Lilleholt (2018), who suggest that immersion can foster positive emotions and a positive cognitive value of the task.

Participant 2 mentioned the sense of belonging, saying, *"I feel like I'm part of their world, and it's comforting."* (P2, personal communication, 2023). This resonates with the research by Reese, Ståhlberg, and Menzel (2021), which suggests that immersive experiences in nature provide opportunities for the development of an integrated sense of self, impacting well-being.

Participant 4 shared the emotional connection, explaining, *"It's not just watching; I feel their emotions, their struggles."* (P4, personal communication, 2023) This is in line with the study by Lemmens, Simon, and Sumter (2021), indicating that immersive games can affect the emotional state of players.

Participant 6 talked about the sense of presence, stating, *"It's so real, like I'm right there with them."* (P6, personal communication, 2023). This is supported by the work of Baños et al. (2004), who found that immersion affects the sense of presence, especially in non-emotional environments.

Participant 7 highlighted the impact on mood, saying, *"It lifts my spirits, takes me to a happier place."* (P7, personal communication, 2023). This aligns with the findings of Zhang, Perkis, and Arndt (2017),

who found that emotional immersion is significantly more immersive in terms of sense of “being there”, time perception, realism, and emotional aspects.

These insights demonstrate how immersive experiences with anime characters can serve as a form of escapism, emotional connection, and mood enhancement, contributing to the emotional and social well-being of individuals in the anime community.

**1.3.2 Idealised Worlds.** The basic theme "1.3.2 Idealised Worlds" reflects how participants in the anime community engage with anime characters in idealized worlds, influencing their emotional and social well-being. This theme is supported by the data from Participants 2, 3, 5, 6, and 8.

Participant 2 expressed a sense of wonder, stating, *"These worlds are perfect, untouched by our reality's flaws. It's a dream."* (P2, personal communication, 2023). This aligns with the findings of Vorderer, Klimmt, and Ritterfeld (2004), who suggest that idealized worlds in media can provide psychological escapism and satisfaction.

Participant 3 mentioned the allure of perfection, saying, *"Everything is so ideal, so perfect. It's what I wish our world could be."* (P3, personal communication, 2023) This resonates with the research by Oliver and Hartmann (2010), which indicates that engagement with idealized media content can lead to elevated mood and well-being.

Participant 5 shared the contrast with reality, explaining, *"In these worlds, everything makes sense, unlike our chaotic world."* (P5, personal communication, 2023). This is in line with the study by Green, Brock, and Kaufman (2004), suggesting that transportation into narrative worlds can lead to enjoyment and a temporary escape from reality.

Participant 6 talked about the inspiration drawn from these worlds, stating, *"They inspire me to imagine a better world, to strive for more."* (P6, personal communication, 2023). This is supported by the work of Slater and Rouner (2002), who found that engagement with idealized media content can lead to inspiration and positive changes in attitude.

Participant 8 highlighted the emotional impact, saying, *"These worlds lift me up, give me something to aspire to."* (P8, personal communication, 2023). This aligns with the findings of Tamborini et al. (2011), who found that exposure to idealized media content can influence emotional states and aspirations.

These insights demonstrate how engagement with idealized worlds in anime can serve as a source of escapism, inspiration, and emotional upliftment, contributing to the emotional and social well-being of individuals in the anime community.

## 2. Socio-Emotional Impact of Parasocial Relationships

The second global theme, "2. Socio-Emotional Impact of Parasocial Relationships," examines the profound influence these relationships have on the emotional and social well-being of individuals in the anime community, as evidenced by the experiences of Participants 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7. Participant 1 expressed a sense of belonging through their connection with anime characters, resonating with Cohen's (2004) suggestion that parasocial relationships can fulfill social and emotional needs. Participant 2's emotional investment in character stories aligns with Giles' (2002) findings on the strength of parasocial bonds. Participant 4's account of enhanced social interactions through shared media experiences is supported by Tsao's (1996) research, while Participant 5's reliance on these characters for comfort during social isolation echoes Derrick, Gabriel, and Hugenberg's (2009) findings.

Furthermore, Participant 7's reflection on how these relationships shape self-perception and social relations is in line with Klimmt, Schmid, and Orthmann's (2009) study on the influence of parasocial interactions on self-concept. Collectively, these insights underscore the significant socio-emotional impact of parasocial relationships with anime characters, highlighting their role in providing emotional support, enhancing social connections, and influencing self-perception and identity.

### **2.1 Influence on Interpersonal Relationships**

The organizing theme "2.1 Influence on Interpersonal Relationships" delves into how parasocial relationships with anime characters impact the real-life interpersonal relationships of individuals in the anime community. This theme is supported by the experiences of Participants 2, 4, and 6. Participant 2 described how discussing anime characters with friends deepened their social connections, aligning with Horton and Wohl's (1956) concept of parasocial interaction as a catalyst for social bonding. Participant 4 shared how relating to a character's struggles facilitated empathy in their personal relationships, resonating with Cohen's (2001) findings on the role of parasocial relationships in enhancing empathy and social understanding.

Participant 6's experience of using anime characters as a benchmark for real-life relationships echoes the research by Eyal and Cohen (2006), which suggests that parasocial relationships can influence expectations and behaviors in actual relationships. These insights from the participants' data highlight the complex interplay between parasocial and interpersonal relationships, revealing how the former can shape social interactions, empathy, and expectations in the latter. This theme directly addresses the research objective of understanding the influence of parasocial relationships on the social well-being of individuals in the anime community.

**2.1.1 Social Bonds Through Shared Interests.** The basic theme "2.1.1 Social Bonds Through Shared Interests" explores how shared interests in anime characters foster social bonds within the anime community. This theme is supported by the narratives of Participants 1, 3, 5, and 7.

Participant 1 highlighted the role of shared interests in building friendships, stating, *"Talking about our favorite characters has brought me closer to my friends"* (P1, personal communication, 2023). This aligns with the findings of Tsao (1996), who emphasized the importance of shared media interests in forming social bonds. Participant 3 echoed this sentiment, mentioning, *"Anime conventions are where I've met some of my best friends"* (P3, personal communication, 2023), which resonates with the research by Greenwood and Long (2009) on the social benefits of shared media experiences.

Participant 5 described how discussing character development deepened their connections, saying, *"Analyzing character arcs together has sparked meaningful conversations"* (P5, personal communication, 2023). This is in line with the work of Klimmt, Schmid, and Orthmann (2009), who found that shared media content can enhance social interactions. Participant 7 shared a similar experience, noting, *"Bonding over anime has helped me feel part of a community"* (P7, personal communication, 2023), supporting the findings of Vitak (2015) on the role of shared media interests in community building.

These insights from the participants' data underscore the significance of shared interests in anime characters as a catalyst for forming and strengthening social bonds. This theme directly addresses the research objective of exploring the social well-being implications of parasocial relationships within the anime community.



**2.1.2 Influence on Relationship Expectations.** The basic theme "2.1.2 Influence on Relationship Expectations" delves into how parasocial relationships with anime characters shape individuals' expectations and perceptions of real-life relationships. This theme is substantiated by the accounts of Participants 2, 4, 6, and 7.

Participant 2 revealed how their admiration for a character influenced their relationship ideals, stating, "*I find myself looking for qualities in others that my favorite character has*" (P2, personal communication, 2023). This observation aligns with the findings of Fournier (1998), who discussed how parasocial relationships can impact consumers' expectations and desires in real-life relationships. Participant 4 expressed a similar sentiment, noting, "*The way certain characters interact sets a standard for what I want in my relationships*" (P4, personal communication, 2023), echoing the research by Derrick, Gabriel, and Hugenberg (2009) on the influence of media characters on social expectations.

Participant 6 discussed the impact of character dynamics on their perception of relationships, saying, "*Seeing healthy dynamics in anime makes me aspire for the same in my life*" (P6, personal communication, 2023). This is in line with the work of Stein and Wright (2019), who explored the role of media in shaping relationship norms. Participant 7 shared a cautionary perspective, mentioning, "*Sometimes, I have to remind myself that real relationships aren't like the ones in anime*" (P7, personal communication, 2023), supporting the findings of Shapiro and Kroeger (1991) on the potential discrepancies between media portrayals and real-life relationships.

These narratives from the participants highlight the significant impact of parasocial relationships on individuals' expectations and perceptions of interpersonal relationships. This theme directly addresses the research objective of understanding the socio-emotional impact of parasocial relationships within the anime community.

## **2.2 Emotional Well-being and Self-Reflection**

The organizing theme "2.2 Emotional Well-being and Self-Reflection" explores how parasocial relationships with anime characters contribute to individuals' emotional well-being and encourage self-reflection. This theme is supported by the experiences of Participants 1, 3, 5, and 7.

Participant 1 discussed the positive emotional impact of their parasocial relationship, stating, "*It's like having a constant source of positivity*" (P1, personal communication, 2023). This aligns with the findings of Cohen (2004), who emphasized the emotional benefits of parasocial relationships. Participant 3 highlighted the role of these relationships in self-reflection, mentioning, "*I often find myself reflecting on my own life through the lens of my favorite character's experiences*" (P3, personal communication, 2023), resonating with the research by Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm (2006) on the reflective aspects of media consumption.

Participant 5 shared insights into the therapeutic aspects, saying, "*Watching their stories helps me process my own emotions*" (P5, personal communication, 2023), supporting the work of Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) on the cathartic effects of media characters. Participant 7 expressed a similar sentiment, noting, "*It's like they give me a safe space to explore my feelings*" (P7, personal communication, 2023), echoing the findings of Giles (2002) on the role of media characters in emotional exploration.

These accounts from the participants underscore the significant role of parasocial relationships in enhancing emotional well-being and facilitating self-reflection, directly addressing the research

objectives of understanding the emotional and social implications of such relationships within the anime community.

**2.2.1 Self-Discovery and Personal Growth.** The basic theme "2.2.1 Self-Discovery and Personal Growth" delves into how parasocial relationships with anime characters facilitate self-discovery and personal growth among members of the anime community. This theme is substantiated by the experiences of Participants 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

Participant 2 reflected on the influence of a character on their self-perception, stating, *"Their journey made me reevaluate my own goals"* (P2, personal communication, 2023). This aligns with the findings of Hoffner and Buchanan (2005), who noted that identification with media characters can lead to self-reflection and personal growth. Participant 4 expressed a similar sentiment, saying, *"I learned a lot about myself through their struggles"* (P4, personal communication, 2023), resonating with the research by Slater (2007) on the role of narrative engagement in self-discovery.

Participant 5 highlighted the motivational aspect, mentioning, *"Their determination inspires me to push my own boundaries"* (P5, personal communication, 2023), supporting the work of Green, Brock, and Kaufman (2004) on the inspirational effects of media characters. Participant 6 shared insights into the transformative impact, stating, *"Watching them evolve made me want to grow as a person"* (P6, personal communication, 2023), echoing the findings of Tukachinsky (2010) on the role of parasocial relationships in personal development.

Participant 7 discussed the introspective nature of their relationship with a character, noting, *"It's like they hold up a mirror to my own life"* (P7, personal communication, 2023), in line with the research by Vorderer, Klimmt, and Ritterfeld (2004) on the reflective potential of parasocial interactions.

These accounts from the participants underscore the significant role of parasocial relationships in fostering self-discovery and personal growth, directly addressing the research objectives of understanding the emotional and social implications of such relationships within the anime community.

**2.2.2 Emotional Resilience.** The basic theme "2.2.2 Emotional Resilience" explores how parasocial relationships with anime characters contribute to the development of emotional resilience among members of the anime community. This theme is supported by the experiences of Participants 1, 3, 5, 6, and 7.

Participant 1 shared, *"Their ability to bounce back from hardships gives me strength"* (P1, personal communication, 2023), reflecting the findings of Cohen (2001), who emphasized the role of parasocial relationships in providing emotional support and resilience. Participant 3 echoed this sentiment, stating, *"Seeing them overcome obstacles makes me believe I can too"* (P3, personal communication, 2023), aligning with the research by Nabi et al. (2006) on the inspirational role of media characters in fostering resilience.

Participant 5 highlighted the empowering aspect, mentioning, *"Their unyielding spirit in tough times motivates me to stay strong"* (P5, personal communication, 2023), supporting the work of Zillmann (1998) on the emotional upliftment derived from media characters.

Participant 6 discussed the vicarious learning aspect, stating, *"I've learned coping strategies just by observing them"* (P6, personal communication, 2023), resonating with the findings of Bandura (2001) on observational learning and emotional resilience.

Participant 7 focused on the comforting nature of their relationship with a character, noting, *"In moments of despair, I find solace in their stories"* (P7, personal communication, 2023), in line with the research by Giles (2002) on the comforting role of parasocial interactions during emotional distress.

These insights from the participants highlight the significant impact of parasocial relationships on emotional resilience, directly addressing the research objectives of understanding the emotional and social well-being implications of such relationships within the anime community.

### **2.3 Cultural and Community Belonging**

The organizing theme "2.3 Cultural and Community Belonging" delves into how parasocial relationships with anime characters foster a sense of cultural and community belonging among individuals in the anime community. This theme is substantiated by the experiences of Participants 2, 4, 5, and 7.

Participant 2 expressed, *"Connecting with these characters makes me feel part of something bigger"* (P2, personal communication, 2023), reflecting the findings of Jenkins (1992) on the role of media in creating shared cultural experiences. Participant 4 mentioned, *"Discussing these characters with others brings us closer"* (P4, personal communication, 2023), aligning with the research by Baym (2000) on the community-building aspect of shared media interests.

Participant 5 highlighted the cultural aspect, stating, *"It's like being part of a global family that understands these characters"* (P5, personal communication, 2023), supporting the work of Ito (2005) on the transnational communities formed around media content.

Participant 7 focused on the inclusive nature of the community, noting, *"No matter where you're from, these characters unite us"* (P7, personal communication, 2023), resonating with the findings of Couldry (2004) on the role of media in fostering a sense of belonging and cultural identity.

These insights from the participants underscore the significant role of parasocial relationships in enhancing cultural and community belonging, directly addressing the research objectives of exploring the social well-being implications of such relationships within the anime community.

**2.3.1 Subcultural Identification.** The basic theme "2.3.1 Subcultural Identification" explores how parasocial relationships with anime characters contribute to individuals' identification with the anime subculture. This theme is supported by the narratives of Participants 1, 3, 5, 6, and 7.

Participant 1 articulated, *"These characters are more than just fiction; they're a part of who I am"* (P1, personal communication, 2023), echoing the concept of subcultural capital as discussed by Thornton (1995). Participant 3 shared, *"I feel a strong connection to the anime community through these characters"* (P3, personal communication, 2023), which aligns with the findings of Hodkinson (2002) on the role of shared interests in subcultural cohesion.

Participant 5 expressed, *"It's like we all speak the same language when it comes to these characters"* (P5, personal communication, 2023), resonating with the work of Williams (2011) on the formation of collective identity within subcultures. Participant 6 mentioned, *"These characters are symbols of our shared passion"* (P6, personal communication, 2023), supporting the research by Bennett (1999) on the symbolic elements in subcultural identification.

Participant 7 highlighted the inclusive aspect, stating, *"No matter where you're from, if you love these characters, you're one of us"* (P7, personal communication, 2023), which is in line with the concept of imagined communities as discussed by Anderson (1983).

These participant experiences illustrate the profound impact of parasocial relationships on subcultural identification, directly addressing the research objectives of exploring the social well-being implications of such relationships within the anime community.

**2.3.2 Community Support and Validation.** The basic theme "2.3.2 Community Support and Validation" delves into how parasocial relationships with anime characters foster a sense of support and validation within the anime community. This theme is substantiated by the accounts of Participants 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

Participant 2 conveyed, *"In this community, we find acceptance through our shared love for these characters"* (P2, personal communication, 2023), reflecting the concept of social identity theory as discussed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). Participant 4 stated, *"It's reassuring to know others feel the same way about these characters"* (P4, personal communication, 2023), aligning with the findings of Preece (2000) on the importance of social support in online communities.

Participant 5 remarked, *"These characters bring us together, and we validate each other's feelings towards them"* (P5, personal communication, 2023), resonating with the work of Blanchard (2007) on the role of shared interests in community cohesion. Participant 6 shared, *"This community has been a safe space for me to express my admiration for these characters"* (P6, personal communication, 2023), supporting the research by McMillan and Chavis (1986) on the sense of belonging in communities.

Participant 7 highlighted the communal aspect, saying, *"We uplift each other through our mutual appreciation of these characters"* (P7, personal communication, 2023), which is in line with the concept of collective efficacy as discussed by Bandura (2000).

These participant narratives underscore the significant role of parasocial relationships in fostering community support and validation, directly addressing the research objectives of understanding the social well-being implications of such relationships within the anime community.

This study, guided by the aim to identify determinants and impacts of parasocial relationships with anime characters, reveals a complex interplay of psychological mechanisms and socio-emotional influences within the anime community. The findings highlight that these relationships are rooted in identification, coping mechanisms, and escapism, offering emotional regulation, stress relief, and immersive experiences. They significantly influence interpersonal relationships, emotional well-being, and community belonging, fostering social bonds, self-discovery, and cultural identification. In essence, this research not only addresses its core questions but also underscores the profound impact of parasocial relationships on the emotional and social fabric of individuals in the anime community, offering valuable insights for future explorations in media psychology and community dynamics.

### **Future directions and limitations**

The present study lays the groundwork for several promising avenues of research in the domain of media psychology and community dynamics. Future investigations could extend the scope of this research by examining parasocial relationships across a broader spectrum of media, including digital influencers and virtual reality environments, to discern if the patterns observed with anime characters hold true in these contexts. Additionally, longitudinal studies would be beneficial to understand the evolution of parasocial relationships over time and their long-term socio-emotional impacts. There is also a rich opportunity to explore the neurological underpinnings of these relationships using neuroimaging techniques, which could illuminate the cognitive processes involved in parasocial engagement. Moreover, comparative

studies between different cultural or age groups could offer insights into the universality versus specificity of the observed phenomena. Lastly, the role of technology-mediated interactions in enhancing or supplanting parasocial relationships warrants further exploration, particularly in the wake of increasing virtual and augmented reality usage. This study, while comprehensive in its approach to understanding parasocial relationships within the anime community, is not without limitations. The sample is predominantly drawn from a specific subculture, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to the wider population. The reliance on self-reported data also introduces the potential for response bias, as participants may provide socially desirable answers or lack self-awareness of their own parasocial interactions. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of this research precludes the ability to infer causality or changes over time. The qualitative methodology, while rich in detail, lacks the empirical rigor of quantitative measures and the ability to statistically validate the findings. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating a mixed-methods approach, utilizing larger and more diverse samples, and employing longitudinal designs to capture the dynamic nature of parasocial relationships.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this investigation into parasocial relationships within the anime community has revealed their profound influence on both individual and social well-being. These relationships, far from being mere escapism, are instrumental in personal growth, emotional resilience, and the fostering of deep social connections. They serve as a conduit for self-discovery, cultural belonging, and subcultural identification, reinforcing the community's fabric through shared narratives and experiences. The study's insights into the interplay between media characters and real-life dynamics enrich the field of media psychology, emphasizing the significance of fictional narratives in shaping human interactions and community cohesion. As such, parasocial relationships emerge not only as a subject of media consumption but also as a powerful force in the construction of social reality, meriting further scholarly exploration to fully understand their impact on the evolving landscape of human-media engagement.

## References

1. Adam, A., & Sizemore, B. A. (2013). Parasocial Romance: A Social Exchange Perspective.
2. Interpersona: an international journal on personal relationships, 7, 12-25. DOI:10.5964/IJPR.V7I1.106
3. Anderson, B. (1983). Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. Verso.
4. Bandura, A. (2000). Exercise of human agency through collective efficacy. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 9(3), 75-78.
5. Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52(1), 1-26.
6. Baños, R., Botella, C., Raya, M. A., Liaño, V., Guerrero, B., & Rey, B. (2004). Immersion and Emotion: Their Impact on the Sense of Presence. *Cyberpsychology & behavior : the impact of the Internet, multimedia and virtual reality on behavior and society*, 7(6), 734-41.
7. Barthel, A. L., Hay, A., Doan, S., & Hofmann, S. (2018). Interpersonal Emotion Regulation: A Review of Social and Developmental Components. *Behaviour Change*, 35, 203-216. doi:10.1017/bec.2018.19

8. Baym, N. K. (2000). *Tune in, log on: Soaps, fandom, and online community*. Sage Publications.
9. Bennett, A. (1999). Subcultures or neo-tribes? Rethinking the relationship between youth, style, and musical taste. *Sociology*, 33(3), 599-617.
10. Bernhold, Q. S., & Metzger, M. J. (2018). Older Adults' Parasocial Relationships with Favorite Television Characters and Depressive Symptoms. *Health Communication*, 35, 168-179. DOI: 10.1080/10410236.2018.1548336
11. Bii, P. (2013). Chatbot technology: A possible means of unlocking student potential to learn how to learn. *Educational Research*, 4, 218-221.
12. Blanchard, A. (2007). Developing a sense of virtual community measure. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 10(6), 827-830.
13. Bond, B. J. (2018). Parasocial Relationships with Media Personae: Why They Matter and How They Differ Among Heterosexual, Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents. *Media Psychology*, 21, 457-485.
14. Bond, B. J. (2020). The Development and Influence of Parasocial Relationships With Television Characters: A Longitudinal Experimental Test of Prejudice Reduction Through Parasocial Contact. *Communication Research*, 48, 573-593. D Bond, B. J. (2021). Social and parasocial relationships during COVID-19 social distancing.
15. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 38, 2308-2329.10.1177/02654075211019129
16. Brethel-Haurwitz, K. M., Stoianova, M., & Marsh, A. (2020). Empathic emotion regulation in prosocial behaviour and altruism. *Cognition and Emotion*, 34, 1532-1548. doi:10.1080/02699931.2020.1783517
17. Brown, C. M., Shilling, A. A., Young, S. G., & Berrong, L. E. (2015). Acceptance and Rejection of Pets and Parasocial Others Cause Corresponding Changes in the Self's Perceived Relational Value. *Self and Identity*, 14, 233-251. DOI:10.1080/15298868.2014.976253
18. Brown, W. J., Basil, M. D., & Bocarnea, M. C. (2015). The influence of famous athletes on health beliefs and practices: Mark McGwire, child abuse prevention, and Androstenedione. *Journal of Health Communication*, 10(1), 41-57.
19. Brown, W. J., Duane, J., & Fraser, B. P. (2015). An investigation of viewers' attitudes toward celebrity parasocial interaction. *Communication Research Reports*, 32(2), 152-161.
20. Cohen, J. (2001). Defining identification: A theoretical look at the identification of audiences with media characters. *Mass Communication & Society*, 4(3), 245-264.
21. Cohen, J. (2004). Parasocial break-up from favorite television characters: The role of attachment styles and relationship intensity. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 21(2), 187-202.
22. Cole, T., & Leets, L. (1999). Attachment Styles and Intimate Television Viewing: Insecurely Forming Relationships in a Parasocial Way. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 16, 495-511.
23. Couldry, N. (2004). Theorising media as practice. *Social Semiotics*, 14(2), 115-132.
24. Derrick, J. L., Gabriel, S., & Hugenberg, K. (2009). Social surrogacy: How favored television programs provide the experience of belonging. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45(2), 352-362.
25. Doré, B., Morris, R., Burr, D. A., Picard, R. W., & Ochsner, K. (2017). Helping Others Regulate Emotion Predicts Increased Regulation of One's Own Emotions and Decreased Symptoms of

- Depression. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 43, 729-739. doi:10.1177/0146167217695558
26. Elmer, T., Boda, Z., & Stadtfeld, C. (2017). The co-evolution of emotional well-being with weak and strong friendship ties. *Network Science*, 5, 278-307.
27. Erickson, S., & Dal Cin, S. (2018). Romantic Parasocial Attachments and the Development of Romantic Scripts, Schemas and Beliefs among Adolescents. *Media Psychology*, 21, 111-136.
28. Eyal, K., & Cohen, J. (2006). When good friends say goodbye: A parasocial breakup study. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 50(3), 502-523.
29. Eyal, K., & Dailey, R. M. (2012). Examining Relational Maintenance in Parasocial Relationships. *Mass Communication and Society*, 15, 758-781. DOI:10.1080/15205436.2011.616276
30. Flores, L. E., & Berenbaum, H. (2012). Desire for emotional closeness moderates the effectiveness of the social regulation of emotion. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 53, 952-957. doi:10.1016/J.PAID.2012.07.009
31. Giles, D. C. (2002). Parasocial interaction: A review of the literature and a model for future research. *Media Psychology*, 4(3), 279-305.
32. Gleason, T. R., Theran, S. A., & Newberg, E. M. (2017). Parasocial interactions and relationships in early adolescence. *Frontiers in psychology*, 8, 255.
33. Green, M. C., Brock, T. C., & Kaufman, G. F. (2004). Understanding media enjoyment: The role of transportation into narrative worlds. *Communication Theory*, 14(4), 311-327.
34. Greenwood, D. N., & Long, C. R. (2009). Psychological predictors of media involvement: Solitude experiences and the need to belong. *Communication Research*, 36(5), 637-654.
35. Hodkinson, P. (2002). *Goth: Identity, style, and subculture*. Berg.
36. Hoffner, C., & Buchanan, M. (2005). Young adults' wishful identification with television characters: The role of perceived similarity and character attributes. *Media Psychology*, 7(4), 325-351.
37. Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215-229.
38. Ito, M. (2005). Intertextual enterprises: Writing alternative places and meanings in the media mixed networks of Yugioh. In D. Buckingham & R. Willett (Eds.), *Digital generations: Children, young people, and new media* (pp. 180-200). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
39. Jaremka, L. J., Lindgren, M., & Kiecolt-Glaser, J. (2013). Synergistic relationships among stress, depression, and troubled relationships: Insights from psychoneuroimmunology. *Depression and Anxiety*, 30. doi:10.1002/da.22078
40. Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. Routledge.
41. Kabaji, E., & Mukanzi, C. (2018). QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH: TOWARDS RELATIVIST ONTOLOGY AND INTERPRETIVIST-CONSTRUCTIVIST EPISTEMOLOGY. *Strategic Journal of Business & Change Management*, 5.
42. Klimmt, C., Hartmann, T., & Schramm, H. (2006). Parasocial interactions and relationships. In J. Bryant & P. Vorderer (Eds.), *Psychology of entertainment* (pp. 291-313). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
43. Klimmt, C., Schmid, H., & Orthmann, J. (2009). Exploring the enjoyment of playing browser games. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 12(2), 231-234.

45. Kurtin, K. S., O'Brien, N. F., Roy, D., & Dam, L. (2018). The Development of Parasocial Interaction Relationships on YouTube. *Social media and society*, 7, 233-252. DOI:10.1177/2056305118787807
46. Lather, J., & Moyer-Gusé, E. (2011). How Do We React When Our Favorite Characters Are Taken Away? An Examination of a Temporary Parasocial Breakup. *Mass Communication and Society*, 14, 196-215. DOI
47. Lather, J., & Moyer-Gusé, E. (2011). How Do We React When Our Favorite Characters Are Taken Away? An Examination of a Temporary Parasocial Breakup. *Mass Communication and Society*, 14, 196-215. DOI: 10.1080/15205431003668603
48. Lemmens, J. S., Simon, M., & Sumter, S. (2021). Fear and loathing in VR: the emotional and physiological effects of immersive games. *Virtual Reality*, 26, 223-234.
49. Lewandowski, G., Mattingly, B. A., & Pedreiro, A. (2014). Under Pressure: The Effects of Stress on Positive and Negative Relationship Behaviors. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 154, 463-473. doi:10.1080/00224545.2014.933162
50. Liebers, N., & Straub, N. (2020). The impact of fantasy on parasocial relationships with media characters: A structural equation model. *Media Psychology*, 23(4), 535-557. DOI: 10.1080/15213269.2019.1623694
51. Lou, C. (2021). Social Media Influencers and Followers: Theorization of a Trans-Parasocial Relation and Explication of Its Implications for Influencer Advertising. *Journal of Advertising*, 51, 4-21.
52. Madison, T., & Porter, L. (2015). The People We Meet. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 35, 47-71. DOI: 10.1177/0276236615574490
53. Makransky, G., & Lilleholt, L. (2018). A structural equation modeling investigation of the emotional value of immersive virtual reality in education. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 66, 1141-1164.
54. McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14(1), 6-23.
55. Morgan, M. J., Shanahan, J., & Signorielli, N. (2014). Cultivation Theory in the Twenty-First Century. In John Wiley & Sons, Inc. eBooks (pp. 480–497). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118591178.ch26>
56. Nabi, R. L., Stitt, C. R., Halford, J., & Finnerty, K. L. (2006). Emotional and cognitive predictors of the enjoyment of reality-based and fictional television programming: An elaboration of the uses and gratifications perspective. *Media Psychology*, 8(4), 421-447.
57. Peplau, H. (1994). Quality of Life: An Interpersonal Perspective. *Nursing Science Quarterly*, 7, 10-15. doi:10.1177/089431849400700107
- Perse, E., & Rubin, R. (1989). Attribution in Social and Parasocial Relationships. *Communication Research*, 16(1), 59-77. DOI: 10.1177/009365089016001003
58. Petriglieri, G., & Stein, M. (2012). *The Unconscious Life of Organizations: Interpreting Organizational Identity*. Oxford University Press.
59. Preece, J. (2000). *Online communities: Designing usability and supporting sociability*. John Wiley & Sons.
60. Ramasubramanian, S., & Kornfield, S. (2012). Japanese Anime Heroines as Role Models for U.S. Youth: Wishful Identification, Parasocial Interaction, and Intercultural Entertainment Effects.



- Journal of International and Intercultural Communication, 5, 189-207.  
DOI:10.1080/17513057.2012.679291
61. Reese, G., Ståhlberg, J., & Menzel, C. (2021). Digital shinrin-yoku: do nature experiences in virtual reality reduce stress and increase well-being as strongly as similar experiences in a physical forest? *Virtual Reality*, 26, 1245-1255.
  62. Ronkainen, N., & Wiltshire, G. (2019). Rethinking validity in qualitative sport and exercise psychology research: a realist perspective. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 19, 13-28.
  63. Rubin, A. M., Perse, E. M., & Powell, R. A. (1985). Loneliness, parasocial interaction, and local television news viewing. *Human Communication Research*, 12(2), 155-180.
  64. Rubin, R., & McHugh, M. (1987). Development of parasocial interaction relationships. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 31, 279-292.
  65. Sachser, N., Dürschlag, M., & Hirzel, D. (1998). Social relationships and the management of stress. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 23, 891-904. doi:10.1016/S0306-4530(98)00059-6
  66. Shedlosky-Shoemaker, R., Costabile, K. A., & Arkin, R. M. (2014). Self-expansion through fictional characters. *Self and Identity*, 13(5), 556-578. DOI:10.1080/15298868.2014.882269
  67. Slater, M. D. (2007). Reinforcing spirals: The mutual influence of media selectivity and media effects and their impact on individual behavior and social identity. *Communication Theory*, 17(3), 281-303.
  68. Steele, R., Hall, J. A., & Christofferson, J. L. (2020). Conceptualizing Digital Stress in Adolescents and Young Adults: Toward the Development of an Empirically Based Model. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 23, 15-26. DOI:10.1007/s10567-019-00300-5
  69. Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G.
  70. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33-47).
  71. Brooks/Cole.
  72. Thornton, S. (1995). *Club cultures: Music, media, and subcultural capital*. Polity Press.
  73. Tsao, J. (1996). Compensatory media use: An exploration of two paradigms. *Communication Studies*, 47(1), 89-109.
  74. Tsao, J. (1996). Shared media experiences and group dynamics: An exploration of the social influence of media. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 40(3), 414-431.
  75. Tukachinsky, R. (2010). Para-romantic love and para-friendships: Development and assessment of a multiple-parasocial relationships scale. *American Journal of Media Psychology*, 3(1-2), 73-94.
  76. Tukachinsky, R. H., & Sangalang, A. (2016). The Effect of Relational and Interactive Aspects of Parasocial Experiences on Attitudes and Message Resistance. *Communication Reports*, 29, 175-188.
  77. Turner, J. R. (1993). Interpersonal and psychological predictors of parasocial interaction with different television performers. *Communication Quarterly*, 41, 443-453. DOI:10.1080/01463379309369904
  78. Vitak, J. (2015). The impact of context collapse and privacy on social network site disclosures. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 59(4), 637-655.
  79. Vorderer, P., Klimmt, C., & Ritterfeld, U. (2004). Enjoyment: At the heart of media entertainment. *Communication Theory*, 14(4), 388-408.

80. Wilding, R., Baldassar, L., Gamage, S., Worrell, S., & Mohamud, S. (2020). Digital media and the affective economies of transnational families. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23, 639-655. DOI: 10.1177/1367877920920278
81. Williams, J. P. (2011). *Subcultural theory: Traditions and concepts*. Polity Press.
82. Wilms, R., Lanwehr, R., & Kastenmüller, A. (2020). Emotion Regulation in Everyday Life: The Role of Goals and Situational Factors. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00877
83. Young, R., & Collin, A. (2004). Introduction: Constructivism and social constructionism in the career field. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 64, 373-388.
84. Zhang, C., Perkis, A., & Arndt, S. (2017). Spatial immersion versus emotional immersion, which is more immersive? 2017 Ninth International Conference on Quality of Multimedia Experience (QoMEX), 1-6.
85. Zillmann, D. (1998). The psychology of the appeal of portrayals of violence. In J. Goldstein (Ed.), *Why we watch: The attractions of violent entertainment* (pp. 179-211). Oxford University Press.

## Appendix - A

### Interview guide

#### Introduction and Background Information

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your interest in anime?
- How did you first get into anime?
- How do you typically engage with anime content?

#### Parasocial Relationships

- Can you describe a character/s from an anime that you feel a strong connection to?
- How would you define your relationship with this character/s?
- How do you typically interact with this character/s?
- Can you describe any emotions that you experience when engaging with this character/s?
- Have you ever felt that this character/s were real or that you had a real relationship with them?

#### Determinants of Parasocial Relationships

- Can you describe any factors that you believe have contributed to your development of a parasocial relationship with this character/s?
- How important is the appearance or personality of the character in your connection to them?
- Are there any similarities between yourself and the character/s that you feel contribute to your connection with them?
- Do you feel that the plot or storyline of the anime contributes to your parasocial relationship with the character/s?

#### Impact on Psychological Well-Being and Social Functioning

- Can you describe any ways in which your relationship with this character/s has affected your mood or emotions?
- Have you ever used your connection to this character/s as a Coping mechanism ?
- Do you feel that your parasocial relationship with this character/s has had an impact on your social life or relationships with others?

- Have you ever shared your interest in this character/s with others, and if so, how did they respond?

### **Closing Questions**

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with parasocial relationships with anime characters?
- Would you be open to participating in any follow-up interviews or further discussions on this topic?

### **Appendix B**

#### **Screening tool - Parasocial Relationships Scale (Tukachinsky, 2010)**

Please indicate your agreement with the following statements, with 1 being “Strongly Disagree,” and 7 being “Strongly Agree.”

1. If X was a real person, I could have disclosed negative things about myself honestly and fully (deeply) to him/her.
2. If X was a real person, I could have disclosed a great deal of things about myself to X.
3. Sometimes, I wish I knew what X would do in my situation.
4. If X was a real person, I could have disclosed positive things about myself honestly and fully (deeply) to him/her.
5. Sometimes, I wish I could ask X for advice.
6. I think X could be a friend of mine.
7. I find X very attractive physically
8. I think X is quite handsome/pretty.
9. X is very sexy looking.
10. X fits my ideal standards of physical beauty/handsomeness.
11. I want X physically, emotionally, and mentally.
12. For me, X could be the perfect romantic partner.
13. Sometimes I think that X and I are just meant for each other.
14. I wish X could know my thoughts, my fears, and my hopes.
15. X influences my mood.
16. I adore X
17. I idealize X
18. If X was a real person I would be able to count on X in times of need.
19. If X was a real person I would give him/her emotional support.
20. If X was a real person he/she would be able to count on me in times of need.
21. If X was a real person I would be willing to share my possessions with him/her.
22. If X was a real person I could trust him/her completely.
23. If X was a real person I could have a warm relationship with him/her.
24. I want to promote the well-being of X.

**Appendix C**  
**Socio-demographic details**

Name	Gender	Age	Socioeconomic status	PSR scale score
S.R	male	22	Upper middle class	136
D.P	Female	23	Middle class	116
B.S	Female	21	Middle class	156
H.K	Others	21	Middle class	120
D.S	Female	18	Middle class	124
A.K	male	23	Middle class	132
S.K	Female	21	Upper middle class	144
L.S	Female	22	Upper middle class	122
R.J	male	21	Upper middle class	135