

YouTubers and the Malaysian Youths: An Exploration into Digital Parasocial Relationships

(YouTuber dan Belia Malaysia: Penerokaan Hubungan Parasosial Digital)

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ABSTRACT

A growing number of young media consumers are turning to online video platforms, with YouTube in particular attracting massive numbers of users and subscribers. As a result, these statistics increase the attraction of the celebrities, or YouTubers, featured in the videos. They gain viewers and worldwide recognition by their public presence and utilisation of vast marketing strategies. According to the concept of parasocial interactions, YouTube users may form links with the celebrities they view online. This study will extend previous research on the development of parasocial relationships conducted by Rubin and McHugh (1987) and Kurtin, O'Brien, Roy and Dam (2018) on social media to determine if such a relationship exists in the Malaysian community on YouTube. The results of a structural equation model were slightly similar to the original ones, proving that watching YouTube was a significant predictor of both social and physical attraction, regardless of ethnicity. The moderating variable of online comments introduced to the framework showed significant contribution to the development and the formation of parasocial ties, which increased the value of relationships. Overall, the results support applying parasocial interaction theory to the YouTube context in Malaysia.

Keywords: *parasocial relationships; YouTube; new media studies; youth; digital culture.*

ABSTRAK

Semakin ramai pengguna media muda beralih kepada platform video dalam talian, khususnya YouTube yang mampu menarik sejumlah besar pengguna dan pelanggan. Akibatnya, statistik ini meningkatkan daya tarikan selebriti, atau YouTuber, yang dipaparkan dalam video. Mereka mendapat penonton dan pengiktirafan di seluruh dunia dengan kehadiran awam mereka, dan penggunaan strategi pemasaran yang luas. Mengikut konsep interaksi parasosial, pengguna YouTube boleh membentuk pautan dengan selebriti yang mereka lihat dan mengikuti dalam talian. Kajian ini akan memanjangkan kajian lepas mengenai perkembangan hubungan parasosial yang dijalankan oleh Rubin dan McHugh (1987) berserta Kurtin, O'Brien, Roy dan Dam (2018) di media social untuk menentukan sama ada hubungan sedemikian wujud dalam masyarakat Malaysia di YouTube. Keputusan model persamaan struktur adalah serupa sedikit dengan model asal, membuktikan bahawa menonton YouTube adalah peramal penting bagi tarikan social dan fizikal, tanpa mengira etnik dan kaum. Pembolehuban penyderhana komen dalam talian yang diperkenalkan kepada rangka kerja menunjukkan sumbangan yang signifikan kepada pembangunan dan pembentukan hubungan parasosial, yang meningkatkan



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nilai perhubungan Secara keseluruhannya, keputusan menyokong penerapan teori interaksi parasosial pada konteks YouTube di Malaysia.

Kata kunci: hubungan parasosial; YouTube; kajian media baru; belia; budaya digital.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, digital media and networks have become intertwined in the everyday lives of people, as part of greater changes in how we engage in information generation, communication, and creative expression (McChesney 2013; Thumim 2012; Van Dijck 2013). Unlike in the early days of computer and computer-based media creation, digital media is now broad and pervasive, with a varied range of individuals and organisations from all walks of life adopting it. Digital media have broken free from the constraints of professional and formal practise, as well as the academic, governmental, and industrial institutions that supported its early development.

This is especially true for young people, who, unlike members of the generations before them, see interactions in the context of non-anonymous online networks as a vital component of both their sense of self and their social life. As a consequence, a lack of Internet connection might potentially result in a person's exclusion from society (Dijck 2013). To succeed in the online world, one must have traits that are distinct from those needed in the real world, where these characteristics include the capacity to read and react to online social cues, develop and manage one's online reputation, and influence how others see oneself. This is because online interactions are less personal, particularly when it comes to moulding others' opinions of them (Boyd 2007). Although the specific forms of technology adoption vary greatly, this generation of young people is growing up in an age where digital media is woven into the social and cultural fabric of learning, play, and social communication. This is especially true in the post-COVID era when digital technologies are assisting in the organizing and growth of everyday affairs ranging from job and school to relationships and identity construction. As a result, it is critical to understand how this generation uses technology to further enrich their identities, build digital cultures, and translate this enrichment into their varied offline ethnic cultures via their social circle.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many forms of social media that have emerged and come to dominate their users' time and energy over the last decade (Zarella 2010), with Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Flickr, YouTube, Reddit, and Yelp being just a few of the platforms. According to Keenan and Shiri (2009), social networking sites can be classified as either "people-focused" or "activity-focused," with the former featuring "profile pages" that host personal details and content about the user and the latter allowing users to share and upload content such as videos and photos. Unlike traditional media, which solely broadcasts information to its audience, social media encourages a two-way conversation between its users (Mohd Faizal, Rosidayu, & NorAdzrah 2014). Therefore, people all over the world, most especially the younger generation, are increasingly using social media as a means of self-expression. When it comes to sharing original works of creativity online, YouTube is one option. Founded in 2005 by Chad Hurley, Jawed Karm, and Steve Chen, this site provides users with a central platform from which they may upload an endless number of videos and watch those uploaded by other users. Since its acquisition by Google in 2006, YouTube has rapidly expanded to become one of the most popular online video-sharing platforms, with over a billion users worldwide (Gill, Arlitt, Li, & Mahanti 2007). Tankovska (2021) claims that the site has over two billion monthly active members and daily video publications, making it the world's second most popular social networking site. After creating an account, users may comment on videos in any of the supported languages, regardless of their native tongue.

Malaysia is not left out in the digital race, and in fact, with an average of 7.2 hours per week, is Southeast Asia's top video-consuming nation. Out of Malaysia's total population of 32.98 million, 89.6 percent have access to the internet; of this number, 30.25 million (or 91.7%

of the total) are active social media users (Kemp 2022). At the beginning of 2022, the same data source estimated that 47.5% of Malaysia's 23.4 million YouTube subscribers were female and 52.5% were male (Kemp 2022). Over 7.5 million Malaysians watched YouTube on their devices in May 2022, and 66% of those viewers feel that YouTube "is TV," according to YouTube Internal Data (SilverMouse Marketing 2022). This highlights the shift in how TV is understood and consumed. The analysis from Digital Business Labs (2022) on YouTube use in Malaysia provides unique insight into the country's video-viewing habits:

- Younger Malaysians (16-34) are the most avid YouTube viewers.
- There are 23.6 million people in Malaysia who might be exposed to a YouTube commercial. However, the majority of YouTube views in the country occur outside of the traditional "prime time" broadcast window of 8.00 – 10.00 pm.
- Video contents involving food, music, gaming and beauty are the ones showing the greatest continuous development on YouTube in Malaysia.
- 7 out of 10 YouTube channels seen by Malaysians are local channels with localized content.

The growth of YouTube influencers, who are content creators with a significant fan base, strong brand identities, and predictable connections with commercial sponsors, has resulted in a rapid increase in the popularity of YouTube in Malaysia (Duffy 2020). It has also been shown that young people are increasingly sharing videos online (Khairi 2015). YouTube has had a huge impact on young people's access to information and pursuit of personal development. This is due to the fact that videos are more engaging and effective than written information, which may be boring to young internet users, as shown by Duffy (2020). Today, YouTube has evolved into a vibrant centre for entertainment-related mass media, with technical growth to be the primary cause of this phenomenon, sometimes known as the structural and technological revolution of communication (Dijk 2006). Because of the increase in YouTube video uploads by young netizens, important personalities in society now have more influence over the everyday routines of young people, especially those who spend a considerable percentage of their spare time viewing online videos. These YouTube stars, or celebrities, possess distinguishing features that separate them apart from the more typical Hollywood A-list. The majority of these videos portray the content creators in their own homes, contain language popular among their generation and its related cultural traditions, and concentrate on topics that teens may identify with (Strangelove 2010). Their viewers' ability to interact with them, both on the digital and personal platforms, through comments and messages provides an impression of approachability and mutual respect.

According to Horton and Wohl (1956), parasocial contact is "*the one-sided interpersonal connection that television viewers construct with media characters*" (Rubin & McHugh 1987: 280). The authors created and validated a pathway that starts with attraction and ends with relationship significance, including parasocial interaction in the between. They used "talking to" to mean "seeing" a character on TV, "liking" to mean "being drawn to," and "intimacy" to mean "valuing" one's time spent with that figure. When it comes to liking and appreciating a TV character, the more appealing the character, the greater the impact on the viewer's parasocial relationships. Research on parasocial relationships has helped to solidify this theory, and it has since been applied to new mediums like radio (Savage & Spense, 2014), online communities (Bellantini & Martin 2005), social networking sites (Frederick E., Choong, Clavio, & Walsh 2012; Baek et al. 2013; Labrecque 2014; Tsiotsou 2015).

Therefore, in understanding the context presented earlier here, this study is a part of a larger research to explore the context of parasocial relationship development between Malaysian viewers and their YouTube idols. As this has not been done so, the results will contribute and update the findings towards a growing compilation of YouTube study in terms of parasocial relationships research, such as those by Chen (2014), Kurtin et al. (2018), Rihl

and Wegener (2019), Perez (2021), and Su, Wu, Chan and Hong (2021), particularly for an Asian setting, by determining whether a connection exists between young Malaysians and their preferred YouTubers, especially when cultural values and religion are so firmly engrained in many elements of the Malaysian multi-ethnic cultures (Wan Husin, Abdul Halim, & Zul Kernain 2020). Thus, the research questions will be as follows:

- Do young Malaysian viewers develop parasocial relationships with their YouTube celebrities?
- How do the antecedents of parasocial relationships affect the strength of relationship importance?
- Can YouTube's comment features, which enable viewers to engage with videos, impact the degree of the parasocial relationships?

METHODOLOGY

Parasocial interaction and parasocial connections were developed by Horton and Wohl (1956) as a result of their study of the effect of television personalities with whom viewers felt a strong connection, as based on their argument as follows: *“One of the striking characteristics of the new mass media – radio, television, and the movies – is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer. The conditions of response to the performer are analogous to those in a primary group. The most remote and illustrious men are met as if they were in the circle of one’s peers ... We propose to call this seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer a parasocial relationship”* (1956: 215). Many studies have been looking into this phenomenon and this became a popular concept in reception research as studied by Bond (2016), Bellantine and Martin (2005) and Hartmann and Goldhorn (2011). In following that, conceptual research has focused on distinguishing parasocial behaviour from parasocial relationships and, more recently, parasocial opinion leaders such as athletes (Frederick et al. 2012), brand icons (Labrecque 2014), and even ordinary every-day people (Strangelove 2010). The concept's empirical execution also requires the development of new measuring scales, survey equipment, and qualitative analysis procedures (Auter & Palmgree 2000; Dibble et al. 2016; Hoerner 2010). Following that, more studies have examined whether or if the notions of parasocial contact and parasocial relationships may be applied to novel phenomena that have evolved as a result of improvements in media technology (Tsotsou 2015; Brown 2015). This study will take one of these perspectives by evaluating literature on how Malaysian youths have formed parasocial connections, in looking at the existence of parasocial ties between Malaysian YouTube users and (also international) YouTube content providers, and if cultural beliefs and values do play a part in the relationship. Positioned contextually for a Malaysian YouTube audience, it is also hoped that this study will be able to add to the ongoing discussion regarding parasocial interactions in the age of digital forms of communication and engagement.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Khamis et al. (2017:19) define self-branding as "creating a distinctive public image for financial benefit and/or cultural capital," and social media gives regular people the ability to do just that. People can become social media influencers by sharing their unique perspectives and/or material, which can lead to a growing fan following and ultimately, online stardom. Because of the personal nature of their communications and interactions with customers, in which they routinely divulge details of their lives and engage in mutual exchanges, social media influencers may beat traditional celebrities in terms of endorsement (Breves et al. 2021). This

means that the endorsements of social media influencers are powerful social proofs for the brands they promote. Consumers trust the recommendations of social media influencers because the commercial content they share is organically integrated into their daily lives (Kim & Kim 2021)

Existing influencer literature has looked at the role of influencers' personal attributes in influencing endorsement outcomes from the perspective of the source effect model in order to better understand how influencer marketing functions, whether in the context of social media influencers or more traditional celebrities. Attractiveness, credibility, and expertise are just some of the well-established influencer attribute factors that have been shown to elicit positive consumer perception and behavioural intention (Chung & Cho 2017; Schimmelpfennig & Hunt 2020; Sokolova & Kefi 2020; Torres et al. 2019; Yuan & Lou 2020). As a result of their immense popularity, authors of existing research have begun to investigate distinctive characteristics of social media influencers like the size of their fan bases (Arora et al. 2019; De Veirman et al. 2017). Some studies have found positive effects of a large number of followers on consumer perception and behaviour, while others have found either no effect or a negative effect (Aw & Chuah 2021; Boerman 2020; De Veirman et al. 2017).

The evaluation of past literature shows some studies conducted to establish a general psychological mechanism of influence for the success of influencer marketing. In particular, previous research has focused extensively on determining which aspects of influencers' personas—such as their beauty and credibility—drive the most desirable endorsement outcomes (Chung & Cho 2017; Sokolova & Kefi 2020; Torres et al. 2019). Given that the social media content presentation and social media interactions with consumers are the keys to the success of an influencer endorsement, this knowledge gap leads to a limited understanding of how social media influencers and their partnered brands can practically manage their self presentation on social media (Aw & Chuah 2021; Liu et al. 2020). Previous studies have shown that our knowledge of the effects of interactivity and self-disclosure on endorsement efficacy is limited; thus, future studies should aim to not only determine whether or not these characteristics affect endorsement effectiveness, but also the mechanism by which they do so (Leite & Baptista 2021; Liu et al. 2020). In addition, the influencer-consumer attachment has been hailed as the next frontier in the influencer marketing literature (Moraes et al., 2019), although there is still a startling lack of clarity regarding how to best promote relationships between consumers and influencers. For example, while previous studies have identified social media interactions and influencer personal characteristics as antecedents to parasocial relationships (Chung & Cho 2017; Aw & Labrecque 2020; Sokolova & Kefi 2020), these studies did not provide clear insights into the specific content and interaction strategies that foster parasocial relationships and the potential mediating impact of parasocial relationships on the endorsement outcomes. Furthermore, the linear assumption and variance-based approach is widely used in the existing studies to investigate the phenomenon, which results in an oversimplified understanding of the phenomenon as the complexities of consumer perception and behaviour in response to influencer marketing are not adequately captured (Pappas & Woodside 2021).

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Using various media theories, such as the uses and gratifications theory and the uncertainty reduction theory, Rubin and McHugh (1987) investigated the ties between communication, liking, and intimacy in order to predict the antecedents and consequences of what parasocial relationships, as proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956). They looked at whether, and the extend of, parasocial interactions developed similarly to or differently from the kind of relationships outlined by Berger and Calabrese's (1975) stage model of relational development,

concentrating on three axioms, to apply towards their investigation in the use of television context. The first axiom posited that more frequent communication and engagement reduces uncertainty, which in turn encourages more communication and interaction, and so on, strengthening the bond between the parties involved. As a result, getting to know a TV star better should lead to less anxiety and, in turn, more positive parasocial behaviour on the part of the viewer. The following axiom, which is Axiom 7, by Berger & Calabrese (1975) postulated that reduced ambiguity given by frequent contact enhances liking or interpersonal attraction. Applying this adage to the realm of parasocial television, Rubin and McHugh (1987) posited that viewers would become more enamoured with a show's protagonist after seeing them in many episodes. Yet, there are several factors at play in interpersonal attraction, as this is quite subjective and multifaceted. As proposed by Kurtin et al., (2018), there are three ways to define attraction to a TV personality: (i) the extent to which the viewer sees themselves in the TV personality or wants to befriend them (*social attractiveness*); (ii) the extent to which the viewer finds the TV personality physically attractive (*physically attractive*); and (iii) the extent to which the viewer sees the TV personality as competent, credible, or reliable (*task attractiveness*). According to Berger and Calabrese's (1975) axiom 14, there is a causal link between liking someone and feeling close to them. Therefore, in applying to the TV context, parasocial attachment to a TV star results from a viewer's interpersonal connection to that star, argue Rubin and McHugh (1987). Therefore, based on this study, Rubin and McHugh proposed that the degree to which a television viewer finds a relationship important would depend on parasocial interactions with that personality, well as on the perception of that personality's attractiveness, as shown in their framework in Figure 1.

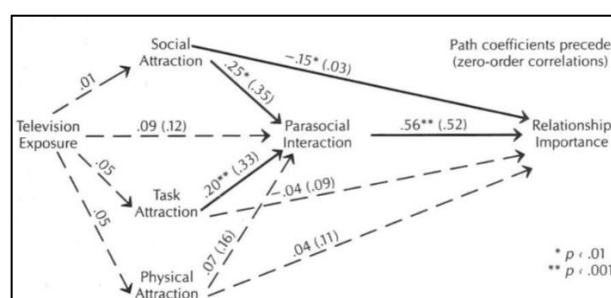


Figure 1. Path analysis of mediated attraction (Rubin & McHugh 1987)

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Subsequent empirical research has addressed the establishment of parasocial relationships for various sorts of television characters, expanding on Rubin and McHugh's examination of television as an environment for parasocial relationship formation. Parasocial relationships are strongest when a television personality engages the audience in some form of self-address and through repeated exposure, according to research involving news anchors (Levy, 1979), soap opera characters (Rubin & Perse 1987), comedians (Auter 1992), TV shopping hosts (Grant et al. 1991), and talk show hosts (Koenig & Lessan 1985). The parasocial connections studied here characterise affinities that emerge from repeated, or ongoing, exposure to a personality over time, which is characteristic of social media interaction (Dibble et al. 2016; Hartmann & Goldhorn 2011; Horton & Wohl 1956). Although Rubin and McHugh (1987) interchangeably used the phrases, parasocial research has since separated the two concepts into distinct categories. The present study is an investigation on the bonds formed via repeated interactions, especially focusing on the feedback channels such as the comments section, as well as community channels that are available on YouTube.

Recent empirical research on parasocial interactions in new media reveals that the participatory character of digital environments like Facebook (Joinson 2008; Tsiotsou 2015) and Twitter (Bond 2016; Frederick et al. 2012; Stever & Lawson 2013) promotes parasocial interaction and encourages certain users to create more parasocial than interpersonal relationships (Chen 2014; Jin & Park 2009). Parasocial studies have shown that viewers react to media personalities in ways similar to how they respond to those with whom they have interpersonal interactions, suggesting that the human brain processes mediated experiences in ways comparable to direct lived experiences (Kanazawa, 2002). Because of the manner in which viewers equate mediated experience with genuine experience on those media that give a prolonged participation role, an engaged new media user may be more likely to establish parasocial interactions than even an active television or radio viewer or listener (Chen 2014), as "...intimate, behind-the-scene insights into [their] normal lives and taste preferences," as Bond (2016:657) puts it, are what TV characters who use Twitter provide to viewers.

The blurring of lines between users, viewers, celebrities, and the personalities they play is one of the most appealing aspects of these interactive social networks. Several studies have demonstrated that viewers may "follow" or "friend" not just the people they choose to interact with, or the people they already know, or the people they've been exposed to via their friends, but also corporations, organisations, celebrities, and fictional versions of the latter (Frederick et al. 2012; Labrecque 2014). Celebrities and other public figures may be approached for interviews or other forms of connection through social media, but genuine two-way relationships may not always materialise. While many people use Twitter and Facebook to get in touch with celebrities, Baek et al. (2013) point out that this is mostly a one-way street. This means that mere proximity to the celebrity does not guarantee the development of any meaningful bonds. Researchers have shown that parasocial contact is more common on social networking sites than on other platforms because of these factors (Frederick et al. 2012; Frederick et al. 2014; Stever & Lawson 2013). For Bond (2016), the fact that many people believe Twitter to be a "genuine avenue for celebrity voices" helps to explain the prevalence of parasocial connections there.

YOUTUBERS & THEIR VIEWERS

YouTube channel owners that regularly post their own original videos to their channels are sometimes referred to as "YouTubers" (Hidalgo-Mari & Segarra-Saavedra 2017). They worked hard to keep their channels current because they knew that adding new forms of entertainment would keep viewers tuning in. Because of the effect their videos and livestreams have on their viewers, YouTubers are sometimes referred to as opinion leaders or influencers (Aran-Ramspott, Fedele, & Tarrago 2018), where their personality, appeal and competence all play key roles in their impact as YouTubers (Choi & Behm-Morawitz 2017; Salyer & Weiss 2020).

The increasing number of YouTubers as content providers has had an impact on YouTube users, with the creators hoping to garner views by portraying likeable characters while keeping their true selves hidden (Holmbom, 2015). Nonetheless, their charm in the video has been the driving force behind the growing fandom and eagerness of people to follow a YouTuber (Smith 2015; Cocker & Cronin 2017). Younger viewers see YouTubers as more "real" since they produce material about their everyday lives (Salyer & Weiss 2020). Expert YouTubers also have a good effect on their youthful viewers since their videos may be used as online lectures or educational resources as they provide scholastic wisdom or expertise, giving their young viewers a chance to learn from them and spurring an interest in education (Ifitikhar, Riaz, & Yousaf 2019). According to Yoon and Tourassi (2014) and Ifitikhar et al. (2019), the 74% of students prefer to study by watching a YouTube video rather than reading an academic journal or book, and they remember more knowledge this way. Furthermore, it was shown that

Youtubers inspired young viewers to develop a healthy sense of self-esteem through promoting positive themes in their videos (Khan 2016; Choi & Behm-Morawitz 2017). Westenburg (2016) observed that Youtubers' instructions and language result in a more thorough understanding of the topic among young viewers. As a result, young viewers choose to educate themselves, fostering a lifelong love of learning (Choi & Behm-Morawitz 2017).

It is no doubt that despite the positive influences of Youtubers, there are also negative effects, such as the study by Westenburg (2016) showing that the YouTube viewers' purchase intentions have been unconsciously influenced by the Youtubers, and this has also been confirmed by Lopes et al. (2020). Not only that, videos with contents of foul language and alcohol consumption have inspired young audiences into trying them out (Westenburg 2016; Aran-Ramspott et al. 2018), triggering concerns and worries that audiences, especially young ones, are utilising YouTube to escape from reality and their social roles (Yen, Chang, & Chou 2019).

Thus, if considered as the result of repeated parasocial interactions, serial forms may provide a firm basis for the establishment of parasocial relationships (Vorderer & Knobloch 1996). As a consequence of parasocial relationships, it is easy to explain the frequent use of media services (Hartmann, Klimmt, & Vorderer 2001). Viewers may grow to see celebrities as friends (Vorderer 1996; Rubin, Perse, & Powell 1985), aspects of their identity (Gleason, Theran, & Newberg 2017) or even role models as a result of these constant, reciprocal connections, as shown by Fisherkeller (1997), and Schmid and Klimmt (2011). Not only is there a desire to meet the celebrity, but there is also a feeling of belonging to a media-connected social network (Rubin, Perse, & Powell 1985). For a long time, academic research has focused on semi-friendly parasocial interactions, in which public figures are seen as a positive extension of the audience (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen 2016).

There has been a rise in the number of studies that critically explore the phenomena of online communication and, by extension, the alteration of parasocial connections brought about by the introduction of interactive media as a result of the digitization of these settings. Although Click, Lee, and Holladay (2013:365) conclude that 'the heightened sense of closeness and familiarity created by two-way interaction and celebrities' online disclosure of personal information has blurred the boundaries that once separated "real" and "imaginary" (parasocial) relationships in tradition media' their study reveals that while their uploads and postings on social media may strengthen the feeling of closeness and availability, the communications do not necessarily increase. Stever and Lawson (2013) found that although fans believe they have a deep understanding of their favourite celebrities, this is often not the case. All their fans add up in the eyes of the celebrity, a collective group as a whole, rather than on an individual basis; they are "a recognised component of [their] parasocial network" (Stever & Lawson 2013:349). In this way, having an online conversation is not at odds with the traditional parasocial relationship but rather a "new social connection that might increase the enjoyment of the PSI/PSR" (Stever & Lawson 2013:351).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

With the expansion of social media comes a greater need to investigate the reach and impact of Youtubers, and this is especially essential in Malaysia, which has a dynamic and growing dedication to online networking and communication. Malaysians and their Youtubers have not been the subject of many scholarly studies, particularly in the sphere of parasocial relationships. Previous research has examined YouTube's effectiveness as a language-learning resource (Hasan 2013; Juhary 2012), a medium for higher education (Danyaro et.al. 2010; Aripin et al. 2016), a platform for the dissemination of hate speech involving politics and race (Lingam & Aripin 2017), and even the understanding of national identity via YouTube

comments (Tze & Hassan 2021). The emergence of the parasocial relationship between Malaysians, especially young Malaysians, and their YouTubers is thus not well understood. This investigation will assist to fill up some gaps in this sector.

This study followed the framework as set by Kurtin et al. (2018) on YouTube, whose work replicated Rubin and McHugh's (1987) framework on TV. However, a new moderating variable of online comments, will be introduced to the framework to understand holistically the effect and impact on parasocial relationships, as proposed in the path model seen in Figure 2.

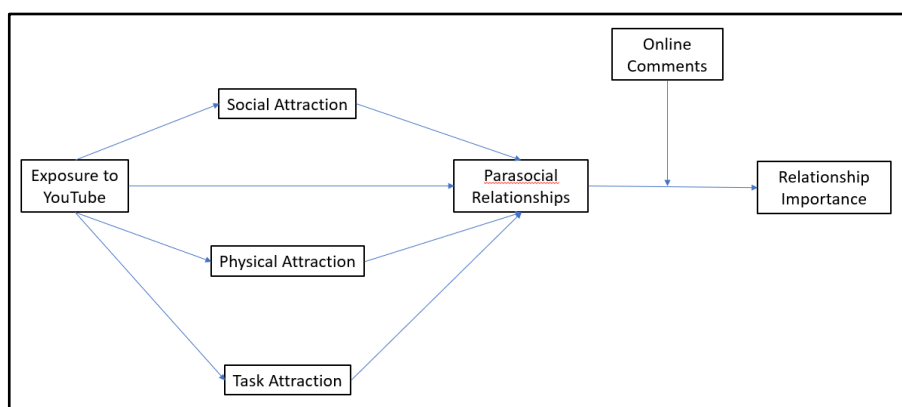


Figure 2. Proposed Path Model of this study
 (adapted from Rubin & McHugh 1987; Kurtin et al. 2018; Rihl & Wegener 2019)

ANTECEDENTS OF PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIP

Attraction between people is multifaceted; it includes interest in completing a shared goal, in spending time together, and in a shared sexual interest. Therefore, that relational attraction or interpersonal attraction is a crucial precursor of a parasocial relationship, and as McCuskey & McCain (1974) posits, consists of three dimensions – task attraction, social attraction and physical attraction, and at the foundation of it all, the people involved will need to like or be comfortable with the other party (McCuskey, Larson, & Knapp 1981).

Task attraction The term for the allure of social media influencers is "task attraction" (Kim K. , 2018). Hellweg and Andersen (1989) advanced a similar argument, stating that individuals are more drawn to tasks that they perceive as being within their capabilities. Work attraction may also predict if a certain activity would be simpler to complete with the assistance of social media influencers (Han & Yang 2018). There is evidence that media characters may teach viewers real-world applicable skills (McCuskey, Hamilton, & Weiner 1974). Consequently, the attractiveness of the work is a significant element in deciding whether or not audiences believe that social media influencers can effectively do the assigned duty and serve as a dependable resource (Auter & Palmgreen 2000). To further enhance PSRs, audiences that consistently obtain useful information that aids in completing a task are more likely to feel positively about these influencers on social media (Xiang, Zheng, & Hu 2014). In a similar vein, Rubin and McHugh (1987) proposed that viewers' ability to empathise with media characters is proportional to the level of task attraction they experience for such characters. Thus, task attraction boosts viewers' comprehension, leading them to learn more from media characters and so raising their parasocial relationship capabilities (McCuskey & McCain 1974).

Social Attraction Social attraction refers to the adoration of an influencer by an audience based on similarity, liking, and compatibility (Lee & Giles 2008), where it indicates a viewer's willingness to interact with media characters as well as their degree of familiarity with media personalities (McCruskey & McCain 1974). In addition, social attractiveness is a function of an influencer's social skills (Preece 2001). The social attractiveness of a parasocial relationship is a predictor of audience behaviour (Loiacono, Watson, & Goodhue 2007), as it helps viewers to connect with media characters by sharing their beliefs and interests (Preece 2001), resulting in sufficient likability and motivating audiences to change their perspectives (Kiesler & Goldberg 1968). In other words, audiences establish these parasocial relationships with media characters due to the fact that social attraction causes audiences to perceive a stronger connection when they see shared characteristics with media characters (Pettigrew 1998). The more attributes social media influencers share with their followers, the higher their followers' comprehension (Chung & Cho 2017). This promotes stronger parasocial relationships between customers and social media influencers (Rubin & Step 2000).

Physical Attraction The remarkable looks and physiques of these media characters constitute their physical appeal (McCruskey & McCain 1974). According to Joseph (1982) and Boon and Lomore (2001), physical attractiveness may impact how an audience views a performer's appearance and fashion sense. In addition, the physically appealing media characters represent the viewers' idealised self (Perse & Rubi, 1989). People's inclination to develop relationships may be predicted by how physically beautiful they view the protagonist (Deutsch & Gerard 1955). Attractiveness enhances the possibility that viewers would identify with social media influencers' personality (Kurtin, O'Brien, Roy, & Dam 2018). In understanding this, the parasocial relationships are built between audiences and media characters when the latter are able to directly communicate portions of their personalities and attributes (Horton & Wohl 1956). When audiences connect with characters in media, they are more inclined to form friendships with them (Blanchot & Rottenberg 1997). In addition, these relationships are further formed due to the positive emotions elicited by enjoying the physical features and facial appearance of social media influencers (Karandashev & Fata 2014), which are then amplified by physical attraction (Liebers & Schramm 2019).

Online Comments Online comments are informational exchanges between the audience and social media influencers (Chatterjee, 2001). It is also a platform for viewers to voice their opinions on social media influencers and indicate whether or not they trust them (Walther & Parks 2002). According to study, viewers usually rely on online comments as evidence when it comes to social media influencers (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman 2009). Consequently, online comments may support the credibility of social media influencers (Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity, & Luoma-aho 2000). When audiences decide to accept content from social media influencers, they consider if other audience members have made the same decision (Gelb & Johnson, 1995). Online comments enable viewers to determine whether their thoughts are shared by others, which motivates them to employ social media influencers (Walther et al. 2009). In addition, positive comments may foster an emotional bond (Sanz-Blas, Bigné, & Buzova 2017) by facilitating a better understanding of media characters based on the opinions of others (Chatterjee, 2001). As a consequence, viewers have higher PSRs with social media influencers and so quickly accept the content (Pornpitakpan 2004). Audiences need facts and signals before they can trust social media influencers and establish these relationships (Walther et al. 2009). Because of the ease with which online comments may alleviate ambiguity (Lim & Van Der Heide 2015), they are increasingly being used to positively alter viewers' impressions of social media influencers by collecting the opinions of those who

already share those ideas. Additionally, the positive feeling further enhances the parasocial relationship ties (Liebers & Schramm 2019) and strengthens credibility (Pavlou, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

Instrument Rubin, Perse, and Powell adapted the most widely used instrument to measure parasocial processes in their 1985 article "Loneliness, Parasocial Interaction, and Local Television News Viewing," which used a scale developed by Levy (1979) to measure affective attachments between audiences and media personalities. This measure was used by Rubin et al. to examine if people's perceived loneliness, TV watching habits, and level of social engagement were all connected (Rubin et al. 1985). Because Horton and Wohl's definition of parasocial interaction is questionable, it is likely that the scale considers a more informal connection between fans and their favourite artists (Dibble et al. 2016; Hartmann and Goldhorn 2011). As a result, proponents of the concept feel it is most valuable when used to study into the kind of good parasocial relationship that may emerge as a result of continuous parasocial interaction (Dibble and Rosaen 2011; Gleich 1996; Schramm et al. 2002). Previously, critiques of the Parasocial Interaction (PSI) scale could only be found in limited literature in selected countries (Gleich, 1995; Leibner et al., 2014; Rubin and McHugh, 1987; Schramm et al., 2002), but this is expanding to the growing interest in this phenomenon. Because of the conceptual difference between interaction and relationship, the PSI scale (Vorderer & Knobloch 1996) has enabled a more complex research of parasocial connections. Auter and Palmgreen's Audience Persona Interaction (API) scale is one such iteration that has been improved upon after first deployment and subsequent methodological debate (2000). Therefore, this study will use a mixture of scales as developed by Rubin, Perse and Powell's (1985) Parasocial Interaction Scale, and Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) Audience Persona scale to examine the responses of Malaysian youth and determine whether there is a link between YouTube and the establishment of parasocial interactions.

DATA COLLECTION

An initial survey (n=50) was used to test out the research design and collect data. The study's goals included validating the PSI scale with digital media celebrities, identifying survey flaws, and learning whether parasocial ties existed between YouTubers and their Malaysian viewers. There were no issues, therefore, data collection was carried out and a total of 358 responses were collected from various educational institutions. Only 307 replies were usable for study once the data was cleaned, validated, and the outliers removed. About 43% of the respondents were males and the remaining were females, with the majority of the respondents (93%) were aged between 18-23. About 75% of the respondents were single, 23% were in a relationship, and 2% were married. In terms of ethnicity, 53% were Chinese, 35% were Malays, 7% were Indians and 5% were Others. Due to the emphasis of the research on parasocial relationships between Malaysians and their favourite YouTubers, survey respondents were needed to be Malaysian citizens, and have to be users of YouTube. Further details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics Profile of Respondents

Item	n=307	%
Gender		
Male	132	42.9
Female	175	57.1
Ethnicity		
Chinese	162	52.7

	Malay	108	35.2
	Indian	22	7.2
	Other	15	4.9
Age			
	16-17	9	3.0
	18-20	130	42.3
	21-23	156	50.8
	24-26	12	3.9
Classification			
	Secondary / High School	22	7.1
	Undergraduate	279	90.8
	Postgraduate	6	2.1
Relationship Status			
	Single	232	75.6
	In a relationship	70	22.8
	Married	5	1.6
Social Media Platforms			
	Instagram	300	97.7
	TikTok	295	96.0
	YouTube	307	100.0
	Facebook	233	75.8
	Other	46	14.9

To understand the extent of social media use, participants were asked to report the social media platforms that they generally use (refer to Table 1), and also their time spent on these platforms (refer to Table 2). Messaging apps with the direct chat function such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Telegram were not included as these would encourage a one-to-one relationship, as well as knowledge of personal details, which would not fall into the parasocial scope as defined by Horton and Wohl (1956).

Table 2. Time Spent on Social Media

Item	n=307	%
Less than 1 hour to 2 hours (per day)	6	1.9
Between 2 to 3 hours (per day)	15	4.9
Between 3 to 4 hours (per day)	32	10.4
Between 4 to 5 hours (per day)	43	14.1
Between 5 to 6 hours (per day)	66	21.5
More than 6 hours (per day)	145	47.2

Participants were also asked the name of their favourite YouTuber, and the category/genre of which their influencer is in. This was done so that they would have a point of reference when parasocial connection questions were addressed. The numbers reported in Table 3 reflected as such due to some of the respondents having multiple favourites. Since this research includes a fictitious connection with a YouTuber, participants were also cautioned against including YouTubers who were already personal friends of theirs, since this may undermine the results in the exploration of this study.

Table 3. Genre of Influencer/YouTuber

Item	n=307	%
Food	296	1.9
Travel	143	4.9
Fashion	45	10.4
DIY	101	14.1
Auto	62	21.5

Gaming	31	
Movies	10	
Music	300	
Others	98	47.2

The respondents were then given a questionnaire with a variety of modified scales (see Table 4) to complete, using a five-point Likert scale to describe their degree of agreement (5 for Strongly Agree) or disagreement (1 for Strongly Disagree). Since the formation of a parasocial connection calls for repeated interactions between viewer/user and YouTuber, respondents were encouraged to seriously identify their preferred YouTuber (particularly if they had more than one preference) before submitting their responses. Instructions and the usage of the combination scale helped ensure that respondents had interacted or engaged with the YouTuber before, and that the connection under consideration was genuine and not a fluke.

Table 4. Measurement of items from the questionnaire

Variable	Number of Items	Adapted from
YouTube Exposure	2	Kurtin et al. 2018
Parasocial Relationship	6	Rubin et al. 1985 Hartmann et al. 2008 Auter & Palmgreen 2000 Kim et al. 2018 Bocarnea & Brown 2007
Attraction – Social, Physical & Task	18	Rubin & McHugh 1987 McCruskey & McCain 1974
Relationship Importance	6	Rubin & McHugh 1987
Online Comments	6	Rihl & Wegener 2019 Su et al. 2021

FINDINGS

DATA ANALYSIS

Reliability and Validity Analysis Cronbach's α may be used to assess the consistency of a set of scores or ratings. Accuracy of the measurements in the sample is increased if the Cronbach's α is higher than 0.8 (Bagozzi & Yi 1988), where at least a 0.35 coefficient of determination is needed in order for the measurements to be reliable. Table 5 shows that the Cronbach's α for every section of the questionnaire is more than 0.8.

Besides looking at the correlation between each individual measurement, the composite reliability (CR) is also examined where an value of more than 0.6 is considered to be as acceptable (Bagozzi & Yi 1988). As seen in Table 5, all CR estimations were higher than 0.8, therefore this lends credence to the evidence being presented.

Another common indicator of reliability is the average variance extracted (AVE). Table 5 shows that all AVE estimates are greater than the 0.5 criterion recommended by Bagozzi and Yi (1988), indicating that the latent variables may be trusted.

Finally, the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to verify the reliability of the suggested research model. The connection between the observables and the latent components may be explored with the help of factor loading. Over 0.5 factor loadings are generally seen as a valid indicator of reliability and validity (Bagozzi & Yi 1988). Table 5 shows that all products have satisfactory factor loadings.

Table 5. Empirical Results

Construct	Measure Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
YouTube Exposure	YE1	0.93	0.90	0.90	0.87
	YE2	0.88			
Task Attraction	TA1	0.87	0.95	0.93	0.78
	TA2	0.88			
	TA3	0.87			
	TA4	0.85			
	TA5	0.82			
	TA6	0.83			
Social Attraction	SA1	0.91	0.92	0.92	0.89
	SA2	0.89			
	SA3	0.89			
	SA4	0.86			
	SA5	0.84			
	SA6	0.88			
Physical Attraction	PA1	0.86	0.91	0.91	0.76
	PA2	0.87			
	PA3	0.84			
	PA4	0.83			
	PA5	0.88			
	PA6	0.86			
Parasocial Relationship	PR1	0.81	0.91	0.90	0.78
	PR2	0.80			
	PR3	0.79			
	PR4	0.79			
	PR5	0.84			
	PR6	0.83			
Online Comments	OC1	0.86	0.88	0.89	0.77
	OC2	0.85			
	OC3	0.90			
	OC4	0.91			
	OC5	0.85			
	OC6	0.84			
Relationship Importance	RI1	0.84	0.92	0.92	0.80
	RI2	0.83			
	RI3	0.85			
	RI4	0.89			
	RI5	0.87			
	RI6	0.87			

Table 6 shows the means, standard deviations and correlations for the variables that were explored. Bivariate correlations were measured based on those by Rubin and McHugh (1987) and Kurtin et al. (2018). Data revealed that a significant correlation ($r = .48, p < .01$) was found in the relationship between the exposure to YouTube and the parasocial relationship that developed after. This shows that significant watching of the YouTubers would help solidify the parasocial relationship.

In the case of the other variables, it was found that each of the attraction antecedents (social, physical and task) held a positive, but low, relationship with the exposure to YouTube

whilst significantly positively related to the development of parasocial relationships. It was also interesting to note that all three variables were significantly related to relationship importance, although not as high as the relationship between parasocial relationships and relationship importance ($r = .59, p < .01$). Online comments were also significant in the development of parasocial relationships ($r = .56, p < .01$), hence relationship importance ($r = .54, p < .01$).

Table 6. Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Exposure	1						
2 Parasocial Relationships	.475	1					
3 Social Attraction	.216	.467	1				
4 Physical Attraction	.273	.415	.409	1			
5 Task Attraction	.232	.422	.426	.453	1		
6 Relationship Importance	.243	.589	.345	.330	.231	1	
7 Online Comments	.487	.564	.212	.236	.227	.544	1
<i>M</i>	3.12	3.16	3.22	3.43	3.15	2.21	3.21
<i>SD</i>	.83	.76	.63	.62	.79	.87	.85

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

In addition, independent t-tests were performed to see whether or not there were significant differences between the groups on each of the measured variables. Independent t-tests were conducted by gender and ethnicity. Due to its ability to evaluate whether or not the means of two groups are substantially different from one another, the independent t-test was the suitable strategy for this comparison.

Gender Differences There was no discernible difference in the ways that males and females interacted with their favourite YouTubers. Nonetheless, there was a negative age effect, with fewer parasocial encounters as persons aged. The parasocial effect may help to explain why some YouTubers are able to connect so closely with their young, teenage viewers. This impact is heightened when there are character and personal history similarities between the actor and the observer (Schmid and Klimmt, 2011).

DISCUSSIONS

This study has achieved its objectives, in exploring these questions:

RQ1: Do young Malaysian viewers develop parasocial relationships with their YouTube celebrities?

Yes, parasocial relationships are clear, and young Malaysian viewers do form such bonds with their favourite YouTube stars, as evidenced by the data shown above. There is no difference in the types of interactions between male and female users, but there is a small effect of age: the deeper parasocial ties between older viewers are less prevalent. Previous work on age and parasocial relationships by Rihl and Wegener is verified and brought up to date by these findings (2019).

RQ2: How do the antecedents of parasocial relationships affect the strength of relationship importance?

This research replicated and extended the work of Rubin and McHugh (1987) on parasocial ties in fictional TV characters, as well as the work of Kurtin et al. (1990), in order to evaluate data about YouTube users (2018). The following are some of the ways in which the results corroborate these studies:

- Higher levels of YouTube consumption reported higher levels of parasocial relationships with a YouTuber (confirmed studies by Baek et al. 2013, Frederick et al. 2012, Stever & Lawson 2013);
- Higher levels of attraction (in tasks, physical and social attraction variables) will result from high levels of YouTube consumption, which then leads to the establishment of parasocial relationships (this is consistent with the findings by McCrosky and McCain 1974, Rubin and McHugh 1987, Seidman and Miller 2013, Rubin and Step 2000).
- Higher levels of attraction also play a significant part in the importance of the relationship. While Kurtin et al. (2018) found no correlation between social and physical attractiveness and the value placed on a relationship, the present evidence suggests otherwise.

RQ3: Can YouTube's comment features, which enable viewers to engage with videos, impact the degree of the parasocial relationships?

Based on the data from Table 6, the ability to comment online on this platform plays a significant role in the establishment of parasocial relationships ($r = .56, p < .01$), thus perceiving that relationship to be important ($r = .54, p < .01$). Comments online are shown to be some degree of interactivity, which confirms that the strength of parasocial relationships increases along with greater interactivity (Rihl & Wegener 2019), thus establishing the importance of that particular relationship.

ETHNIC STUDIES IMPLICATION

The fact that people interact with one another is well-established in the social sciences and the subject of much discussion and study. Given the growing influence of digital media on people's sense of who they are and how they present themselves to the world, it's crucial to examine the ways in which parasocial relationships formed with YouTubers—particularly those endowed with a wide audience and powerful persuasion skills—can shape the self-images of their fans. With these strong ties, there can be the propensity for the YouTubers to convince people to alter their values, behaviours and actions (Gass & Seiter 2015), some to the point of shaping and constructing their identity as well (Lofft 2020). Even though digital technology and communication have been expanding over the globe, this is a new field where the influence of ethnicity has not yet been examined. Therefore, it is essential to comprehend how this generation used technology to enrich their identities, construct digital cultures, and then convert these enhancements into their various offline ethnic cultures by means of their social network.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that parasocial relationships are able to be established in a digitised media environment, demonstrating the viewers', or followers', relatively strong parasocial connections to the YouTubers. Further research can be conducted to further understand how these relationships will impact the young generation where digital tools are aiding in the management and development of everything from work and education to relationships and the building of individual identities.

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