

# Chapter 6


## Parasocial Interaction and Virtual Influencers: Building Connections in a Digital World

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### ABSTRACT

*In today's digitally driven world, human interaction has transformed significantly, particularly with the emergence of parasocial relationships and virtual influencers. This chapter applies Horton and Wohl (1956) parasocial interaction (PSI) framework to critically analyze how audiences connect with virtual influencers. It examines their appeal to younger demographics like Generation Z, who are more receptive to AI-driven figures, and explores how brands employ these influencers as marketing agents. Ethical concerns are highlighted, including transparency, manipulation, and the promotion of unrealistic standards. The chapter also questions the authenticity of virtual influencers, given their entirely orchestrated personas. Further, the chapter provides a comprehensive exploration of these developments, emphasizing the need for ethical responsibility as technology continues to blur the lines between the virtual and real worlds.*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the advent of digital technology has fundamentally altered the nature of human interaction, transforming how people connect, communicate, and form relationships (Djarilkanovna & Baxadirovna, 2024). From the earliest days of email and online forums to today's dynamic social media platforms, the evolution of digital communication tools has blurred geographical boundaries, fostering an unprecedented level of global connectivity. The digital age has revolutionized communication, enabling instantaneous interaction across time zones and cultures (Hermawanto & Anggraini, 2020). Traditional media facilitated one-way relationships between celebrities and audiences, but social media platforms have intensified this phenomenon, enabling not only real-life figures but also virtual personas to foster these unique connections (Wikström, 2014; Paul et al., 2022). Unlike traditional communication, which relied heavily on face-to-face or written correspondence, digital platforms provide a hybrid space where individuals can simultaneously consume, share, and produce content (Huttayavilaiphan, 2024). This democratization of communication has amplified the ability of individuals to craft and disseminate their personal narratives, often elevating ordinary people into influencers or public figures with substantial followings. Social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube have been at the forefront of this transformation (Hogsnes et al., 2023). They have shifted the focus from one-way communication, exemplified by traditional television and print media, to interactive, multi-directional exchanges. Users are no longer passive recipients of information; they actively engage by liking, commenting, sharing, and creating content. This shift has cultivated a new type of relationship between media figures and audiences, termed "parasocial relationships" (Hoffner & Bond, 2022).

This chapter addresses the theoretical framework of parasocial interaction (PSI) first proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956), which describes the illusionary experience where media consumers feel a personal connection with mediated figures, despite the relationship being one-sided. Originally discussed in the context of traditional television and radio personalities, the concept has since evolved and expanded to include social media influencers, and now, virtual influencers. By applying this framework, this chapter critically analyzes how audiences develop PSI with virtual influencers, drawing from contemporary examples and empirical research in the domains of consumer behavior and media studies. The integration of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies promises to deepen parasocial relationships even further, as virtual influencers could become more immersive and interactive, offering real-time, lifelike experiences to their audience (Yu et al., 2024). The boundaries between virtual and real life are likely to blur further with technological advancement, raising important questions about the future of human

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