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I CAN'T LOOK AWAY:
PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH DANCE MOM CHARACTERS ACROSS
TV AND SOCIAL MEDIA

BY
KENNEDY PIRLET

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts

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2024

THESIS ACCEPTANCE PAGE

Kennedy Pirlet

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the master's degree and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree.

Acceptance of this does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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ABSTRACT

I CAN'T LOOK AWAY: PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH DANCE MOMS
CHARACTERS ACROSS TV AND SOCIAL MEDIA

KENNEDY PIRLET

2024

In 2019, *Dance Moms* ended its airing on Lifetime at the completion of the eighth season. However, the show and its cast members remained popular on social media platforms like TikTok, but we still didn't know the relationship between watching the show and following cast members on multiple social media platforms or who audiences were closest to. To answer this question, the celebrity-persona parasocial interaction scale and experience of parasocial interaction scale were utilized. These scales were used in this study and found reliable. Snowball recruitment focusing on social media platforms and emails yielded 180 eligible sample participants. Through a quantitative survey, it was found that individuals perceived themselves as having the strongest relationships with Christi, Kendall, and Holly. However, the measurement scales for relationships indicated the strongest relationships are with Christi, Nia, and Holly and the scales for interactions indicated the strongest relationships are with Holly, Abby Lee, and Kendall. Furthermore, there was no relationship between length of time watching the show and length of time engaging with the content on social media. However, there is an exception, being that the longer they have been watching the show, the longer they have been engaging with the show content on Instagram. This lends evidentiary support that there is no causal

relationship between the amount of time spent watching the show and the amount of time engaging with cast members and show content on social media.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2011, Abby Lee Miller coined the famous phrase “save your tears for the pillow!” This is recognized by audiences of Miller’s reality show, *Dance Moms*. Airing in the early 2010’s era of television, there was some speculation that the rise of streaming services would kill reality television. However, for paid platforms, the focus very clearly became on creating entertaining and addictive popular content that was cheap to produce (Berman, 2022). Enter *Dance Moms*. A staple in the reality television genre, the show captured the essence of what viewers expect: drama and giving the everyday person a platform to tell their stories. However, this modern-day reality show has a twist, it involves children.

Dance Moms is a reality television show that involves real children, their mothers, and their dance teachers in dance training every week for a competition (Harrington, 2020). Although the show is meant to be a docu-series about young female dancers and their moms, the show quickly became overtaken by their larger-than-life dance teacher, Abby Lee Miller. Her cruel teaching tactics and the drama that it brings out amongst the girls’ mothers is what makes it harder for viewers to look away. The show quickly became a surprise success for the Lifetime network with a season average of 2.2 million total viewers. The show also had a median viewer age of 32, in comparison to the Lifetime network average of 48 (Bruce, 2012).

Although the show originally aired in 2011, its so-called “characters” remain relevant on popular social media platforms like TikTok. Some say that the show’s focus on young girls and their journey to win dance competitions each week sparked an interest in dance amongst its audience (Harrington, 2020). As TikTok widely became popular

during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the app's focus was on dancing and influencers creating dances to popular tunes (Kennedy, 2020). As such content continues to be popular, it is no wonder why the reality show remains on a user's "For You" page. Shows like *Dance Moms* have taken part in the reality television cultural phenomenon, one that has transferred over across multi-media platforms. In chapter 1, we begin by defining reality television, reality television celebrities, and social media platforms like TikTok.

Reality Television

A common misconception about reality television is that it did not come about until the 2000's (Deller, 2019). However, reality television dates back to 1948 with what most claim was the genre's first show, *Candid Camera*. At the time of its airing, the show was one of US TV's most popular, bringing something different to audiences. The show also brought audiences Allen Funt's famous tagline "Smile, you're on candid camera!" (Clissold, 2004). At the time of airing, audiences were largely concerned about surveillance due to the Cold War. The premise of the show focused on recording reactions of everyday people when put in extraordinary circumstances. Allen Funt changed the narrative about surveillance anxiety by converting recorded invasions of privacy into shared moments of entertainment among audiences. The recordings seemed to be fully endorsed by those surveilled. All in all, this show was very timely in its production and reinforced the poetic nature of unscripted moments on camera (Clissold, 2004). *Candid Camera* aired for the first time on August 10, 1948, ran in some form on television until 2014, and launched what can be considered the prototype for reality television (Clissold, 2004).

Reality television combines the best and most entertaining aspects of popular television. Ranging from soap operas, game shows, documentaries, sitcoms and melodrama, reality television cannot be readily classifiable just by one of these (Deller, 2019). As there has been such dispute about what it means to use the term “reality television,” researcher Nick Couldry (2009) has coined it a meta-genre, meaning it encompasses several genres. While it is difficult to narrow it down to any one thing, there are a few common themes noticed when defining reality television. Corner (2004, as cited in Deller, 2019) talks about reality television showcasing “ordinary people doing ordinary things”, while Dover and Hill (2007) emphasize reality television being a combination of education, information, and entertainment.

Although reality television is made up of multiple subgenres, the three primary subgenres are competition, dating competition, and surveillance (Deller, 2019). Examples of competition shows include *American Idol* and *The Biggest Loser* whereas popular dating competition shows would include the likes of *The Bachelor*. Arguably one of the most popular subgenres of reality television is that of surveillance. Shows like *Teen Mom* and *16 & Pregnant*, both native to MTV, document ordinary people going about their day-to-day lives (Rodenhizer et al., 2021). The surveillance subgenre is the most popular because of the way that audiences can relate to them or see their own experiences reflected in the so-called “characters” of these shows. This genre also tends to emphasize youth culture and the different lifestyles of both social and cultural groups in different areas of ordinary life, like dating relationships (Rodenhizer et al., 2021)

The term reality television was coined in the 1990’s. Much of the early reality television at this time focused on crime, disaster formats, and consumer affairs (Deller,

2019). Originally a show meant to fill time, *COPS*, now in its thirty fifth season, was greenlit and became an instant success. *COPS* follows police officers in a sort of “ride-along” docuseries with most of the content produced on body cameras. With the great success of this show, reality television picked up and began taking a turn toward what early literature calls “social experiments” at the start of the new millennium. These shows included the likes of *Big Brother* and *Survivor* (Deller, 2019). These two shows are still on the air today, and *Big Brother* saw such commercial success it has inspired spin-offs in countries such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, as well as celebrity franchises as well.

Reality television has radically shaped our world in terms of politics, power and celebrities whether we like it or not (Berman, 2022). Donald Trump is a prime example of a reality star politicizing his position when he ran and won the U.S. presidency in 2016. Formerly on the show *Celebrity Apprentice*, Trump used this show as a platform to make himself seem a wealthy, competent businessman suitable for political office. Some called him the very first made for tv president, with his reality show moving from Trump Towers to the Oval Office (Nesbit, 2016). Today’s popular reality television shows focus on a composite fly-on-the-wall structure which introduces the “characters” and allows audiences to begin following along with their so-called storyline. One-on-one interviews with producers continue to build the narrative with the audience. Such practices began in the late 90’s with the creation of *The Real World* and extends into popular reality shows today like *Dance Moms* and *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (Berman, 2022). With its increasing popularity over the years, reality television is responsible for producing some of the most recognizable and famous figures in popular culture.

MTV's *The Real World* began airing in 1992. It was the first of its kind in terms of the way they formatted the show, with so-called "confessionals," meaning a character's one-on-one interviews with producers. The participants on this show set the stage for what MTV would do in the future. After establishing relationships with audience members, the so-called "celebrities" from this show would go on to be cast in other spin-offs on the network. These "characters" "encode themselves as off-camera texts by performing their "ordinariness" within the confines of their already established reality personas" (Curnutt, 2009, p. 253). *The Real World* did more than just set the precedent for modern-day reality television, it also identified a significant change in the way audiences interact with television stardom (Curnutt, 2009).

The Real World became a popular culture phenomenon after roughly a decade on television. The show's premise surrounded the idea of twelve strangers living together in a New York City loft. There were no auditions, and no requirements and cameras followed the "characters" movements for 24 hours a day. The show attracted audiences to its social experiment-like view. Though the show began with its target audience being 18–25-year-olds, the show has won audiences over up to the age of 60 (Smith, 2000). There is something increasingly captivating about watching "pretty people" in a "pretty house" doing ordinary and everyday things. At the beginning of its eighth season, the show had a shocking 3.8 million viewers tune in (Smith, 2000). Though the show has not had a new season since 2019, the show, and its network MTV, is still one of the first thing viewers think of when they hear the term "reality television."

MTV, aka music television, has dedicated most of its run-time to reality television. With the success of *The Real World* in the early 1990's, MTV went on to

create some of the most notable reality shows in existence today. In 2008 alone, MTV released 16 reality-based television shows (Chiou & Lopez, 2010). MTV is responsible for producing reality franchises like *16 & Pregnant*, *Teen Mom*, *The Jersey Shore*, *The Hills* and many more. The popularity of such shows can cement their time slot on television today.

Reality Television Celebrities

In 2007, the Kardashian-Jenners hit the screen for what would be a successful twenty season reign as America's most known reality stars. Many believe the "KarJenners" to have transformed the reality television genre. Though they had no obvious talents, viewers immediately became enthralled with the sisters, the matriarch Kris Jenner and Olympic gold medalist Caitlyn Jenner at the head of the family. Whether audiences consider them American royalty or popular culture phenomenon's, the family has used their reality television platform to create countless brands including the likes of Kylie Cosmetics, Good American, Skims, and 818 Tequila (Hollywood Reporter, 2022). Kim Kardashian now has a net worth of 1.3 billion dollars, something she can attribute to her start on reality television (Berman, 2022). After twenty seasons on the air, *Keeping up with the Kardashians* came to an end. However, the famous family did not stay away from television too long, reviving a new series titled *The Kardashians* that became available on Hulu in 2022 (Mizoguchi, 2022). After having become known for something as unflattering as a sex tape, Kim Kardashian has done her job to change perceptions of her and her family through the entrepreneurship that is showcased on their show. Reality television stars like these have begun to take over the world of fame, dominating what it means to be a celebrity.

The Kardashian-Jenners are not the only stars who would get their start on reality television; the same could be said for child pop star JoJo Siwa. Originally getting her start as the somewhat controversial “character” on *Dance Moms*, JoJo, and her mom Jessalynn, were determined to make her a star. Debuting on the show in season 5 in January of 2015, JoJo and her mother were confident from the beginning. JoJo can be seen saying, “And that's why Abby brought me here, because she knows I’m a Hollywood star,” in one of her confessional interviews with producers (Verweyen, 2020, 36:06). However, her association with her rather conceited mother and the dysfunctional relationship they displayed with other mothers and daughters on the show meant they had their work cut out for them after leaving the show in 2016 (Johnston, 2020). JoJo had achieved what she and her mother had set out to do, to make her name recognizable.

Although her name was already well-known in the celebrity sphere, JoJo sought to change the child reality star narrative that surrounded her. In the age of the internet, her YouTube channel seemed to be the perfect platform to turn to. This channel helped her to create a more likeable public image with her fans (Mueller, 2019). Videos on her channel showed her demonstrating some of her dance moves and sharing her experiences as a competitive dancer. This allowed her to show more of her true self than how she was originally portrayed on *Dance Moms* as a young girl (Johnston, 2020). Starting as a child reality star, JoJo Siwa boosted her popularity and career through multi-platform use. The average consumer cannot walk through the store today without seeing some sort of JoJo merchandise, whether it be her signature hairbow or a set of pajamas.

Beginning its run in December of 2009, MTV’s *The Jersey Shore* is one of the most successful reality television shows of all time (Sherry & Martin, 2014). This show

follows eight individuals, four males and four females, for a summer as they live and work in Seaside Heights, New Jersey (Anderson & Ferris, 2016). These individuals did not know each other before the show's casting and filming. It is also worth noting that this was not the first show of its kind to participate in a “social experiment” style, as other reality shows like *Big Brother* and *The Real World* also focused on strangers living in a house together. This show ultimately aired for six seasons, with the first season establishing the reality television “characters” that would span the series for its duration (Anderson & Ferris, 2016).

The Jersey Shore on MTV introduced audiences to the GTL lifestyle – gym, tan, and laundry (Us Weekly, 2023). Popular characters on this show include the likes of Nicole Polizzi aka “Snookie” and Mike Sorrentino aka “The Situation.” This surveillance-style show was the number one cable series among young adults aged 13 to 24 at the height of its popularity (Us Weekly, 2023). With its popularity on the screen, it is no wonder *The Jersey Shore* cast has become widely known, whether you watched the show during its airtime. Fans loved the series so much, the original cast members reunited for a reunion special in 2018 entitled *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* (Us Weekly, 2023).

In the age of social media, it is important to distinguish the difference between a celebrity and an influencer. Traditional celebrities are categorized as models, actors, musicians, and others that are seen on television shows, such as reality stars. Influencers can also be known as “micro-celebrities,” someone that has become famous through online social media usage (Nouri, 2018). Currently, TikTok serves as one of the most used social media platforms for influencers to garner attention and fame (Maheshwari, 2023). Professional influencers post content involving them getting ready for social

events, their daily makeup routines, unboxing products, modeling clothing and advertising their personal Amazon storefronts (Maheshwari, 2023). These “micro-celebrities” are normal, everyday people who have attained thousands or even millions of followers on these media platforms (Nouri, 2018).

However, another important factor to note is that not all influencers are celebrities. People may follow celebrities on social media because they admire their talent and the work that they do. People may follow influencers because of the “expertise” they provide on a goal they may want to achieve or a subject they are more interested in learning about, like fitness, cooking, and makeup or fashion (Jankowski, 2021). Although both figures are well-known to the public, traditional celebrities may face certain restrictions when making brand deals. Typically, traditional celebrities can get paid millions of dollars to endorse popular products like Mountain Dew. Whereas influencers, or “micro-celebrities,” typically endorse products that they are involved with or use frequently so they feel comfortable vouching for them (Jankowski, 2021). It is also possible for influencers to turn to celebrities or celebrities to turn to influencers. An example of this would be Charlie D’Amelio, TikTok influencer turned famous musician.

TikTok

Before there was TikTok, there was musical.ly, the most popular app that you have probably never heard of (Carson, 2016). Launching in 2014, the app consists of short 15 second video clips that involve lip-synching or dancing to the top hits. A major success on the app store from 2014-2016, some major artists even began debuting new music on the app rather than their YouTube channels (Carson, 2016). Creators of the app said that they were hoping for musical.ly to be the next major social networking app. The

aim of the app was to create a community amongst users through lip-synching videos. Its short-span videos were sure to capture the attention span of its teenage users (Carson, 2016). Though they did not know it yet, musical.ly and its creators would soon set the stage for the next big social media phenomenon, TikTok.

In September 2016, following the release and success of musical.ly, the Chinese company ByteDance released a similar lip-synching app and later that year released TikTok for markets outside of China. Late in 2017, the ByteDance company purchased musical.ly and merged it with TikTok in 2018 (Anderson, 2020). TikTok is like both Vine and musical.ly as it is a video-sharing platform with videos being up to three minutes long. The videos can include different soundtracks relating to popular genres like dance, lifestyle and comedy (Stahl & Literat, 2023). TikTok differs from other social media networks as it is mainly algorithm-driven whereas other platforms like Facebook and Instagram focus on followers and following (Anderson, 2020). Users determine what shows up on their “For You” page by liking different content. While users can still follow certain pages, this content shows up in a separate page, called “Following,” and is not always present on one’s “For You” page. By knowing what kind of videos users have liked, TikTok uses its algorithm to push similar content onto the “For You” page.

TikTok has dominated the social media scene since its release in North America in 2016. In a Pew Research Center (2022) survey, 67% of teens say they use TikTok, with 16% saying that they use it almost constantly. TikTok is now the top social media platform among teens covered in the survey. While the platform is undoubtedly popular among all teens, it does tend to lean more toward young females. Teen girls are more likely to use Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, whereas teen boys are more likely to use

YouTube, Twitch, and Reddit (Pew Research Center, 2022). TikTok likely plays a large role in the transference of reality stars to other media platforms. In the influencer era, TikTok can serve as its own kind of reality television, with so-called “confessionals” among users.

TikTok has been credited with being a space for contemporary youth expression and has been noted for its role in shaping contemporary internet celebrities (Stahl & Literat, 2023). This media platform offers a unique perspective into users, mostly from Generation Z and how they use the app to share their own perspectives and form a community with one another. When a TikTok user posts a relatable video, it can create a common ground with other users, so much so that some posts may go viral. After these viral posts, these users become more recognized collectively. One such user is Charlie D’Amelio. On March 25, 2020, then American 15-year-old Charlie D’Amelio became the most followed creator on TikTok (Kennedy, 2020). Many of the videos that D’Amelio posted that shot her to TikTok stardom included short, looped videos that focused on lip-synching and hip-hop dancing to popular music. So, I argue that the “ordinariness” of the content of the video emphasized anyone’s ability to become “TikTok famous.”

Charlie and her sister, Dixie D’amelio, changed the way people view TikTok stars. They were the first people to become viral on the social media platform during the coronavirus pandemic. Their early success on the app led to the creation of their own reality television show, *The D’Amelio Show* (Ballard, 2023). The Hulu series first aired in September of 2021 and followed the family with daughters Charlie and Dixie and parents Marc and Heidi on their journey to newfound fame in Los Angeles. Though they were originally from Connecticut, the family made the move to Los Angeles to pursue fame as

Charlie and Dixie gained a bigger social media following (Ballard, 2023). The D'Amelio's are the perfect example of how influencers and reality stars intertwine with one another to become one of the most popular celebrities today.

Some of the original girls from the cast of *Dance Moms* haven't been seen on television in relation to the show since 2014. After almost a ten-year break, there is going to be a *Dance Moms Reunion* coming to Lifetime TV in 2024 (Mercuri, 2023). So far, little information has been released as to when this reunion is going to air, or what capacity if any, Abby Lee Miller is going to be involved in this special. The girls involved in this special include Kalani Hilliker, Kendall Vertes, JoJo Siwa, Paige Hyland, Brooke Hyland, and Chloe Lukasiak (Mercuri, 2023). Though it has not been on the air for several years, the show remains a prominent piece of popular culture with its continued fan following.

Now that we have learned about the history of reality television, reality television celebrities and social media platforms like TikTok, we can dive into the foundational literature and methodology of the study. Chapter two reviews literature on uses and gratifications theory and parasocial relationships. These theoretical frameworks help explain how and why audiences interact with reality television on other platforms. In the current study, I am focused on how audiences form relationships with characters from the reality show *Dance Moms*. After presenting RQs and Hs derived from these theoretical frameworks at the end of Chapter 2, Chapter 3 will describe the sample and methodology of this study. Chapter 4 will detail the data analysis and present the results of those analyses regarding the RQs and Hs. Finally, chapter five lays out implications, limitations and directions for future research in this field.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Parasocial Relationships & Parasocial Interactions

Parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions, while similar, are not the same phenomenon. Both phenomena occur when audiences feel a personal connection to media figures they do not know, but there are important distinctions.

Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships have been studied for decades with Horton and Wohl first defining the term in 1956. Parasocial relationships involve “a lingering sense of intimacy and connectedness with media personalities” (Tukachinsky et al., p. 868, 2020). People develop these PSR’s with individuals that they do not have real-life social relationships with. The basis of their relationship sought to understand “what do people do with the media?” However, a year later Wohl passed away at the age of 36, and for a while, it seemed parasocial phenomena had died with him (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). The idea was brought back to life in 1972 when Rosengren and Windahl published an article titled “Mass media consumption as a functional alternative.” Research on this phenomenon peaked in 1985 when Rubin, Perse, and Powell created the parasocial interactions scale, which became the standard of measurement for parasocial research. However, after a few decades, this scale later became recognized as being more indicative of parasocial relationships than parasocial interactions (Liebers & Schramm, 2019).

As a clear difference was distinguished between parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions, PSR’s began to stand out in some ways. While parasocial interaction primarily takes place between media reception, parasocial relationships can exceed this limit because they go beyond single reception and can develop further into a

long-term relationship (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). Parasocial relationships are also unique because individuals can also have PSR break-ups. For example, if an individual's favorite character on a fictional television show die, those with that relationship will feel as if they have lost one of their friends (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). Since research in this field has grown, parasocial relationship studies have evolved more and more, focusing not just on media characters on television, but also establishing that relationship with influencers on social media. Most parasocial relationships research has focused on non-fictional media characters, which suits the direction this phenomenon is heading toward in the digital age today.

Further exploring parasocial interactions, Yuan and Lou (2020) performed a study about different determinants of a parasocial relationship with audiences and social media influencers. This study also focused on the effects that these parasocial relationships have on an audience member's interest in purchasing the items they see an influencer promoting on social media (Yuan & Lou, 2020). In the digital age today, mass communication networks like TV, radio, and newspapers are no longer the most prominent means of gathering information. Social media has become more popular, and younger generations look to normal people turned media phenomenon's known as influencers for consumption-related information (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). These influencers often build their brand and their fame across several social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, etc.

Other studies have looked at the antecedents and strength of parasocial relationships. This study is unique in that it focuses on influencer source credibility and the role that it plays in an audience member's parasocial relationship with an influencer

(Yuan & Lou, 2020). There are four-dimensional conceptualizations of source credibility. These include expertise, attractiveness, similarity, and trustworthiness (Yuan & Lou, 2020). The role that parasocial relationships play in marketing outcomes such as product interest is also something worth discussing in this study. As influencers largely spend time on their social media platforms talking about their lives and their favorite products, it is important to establish if that information and the parasocial relationship their audiences have with them plays a role in purchasing options later.

This study focused on a participant sample of 355. There were a few prescreening questions about a participant's involvement with influencers before they were able to go on with the survey. Participants needed to follow at least one influencer on social media platforms. Unlike other celebrities or media figures, influencers create content on their social media pages and rely heavily on two-way interactions with others to build their brand (Yuan & Lou, 2020). The results of this study showed that perceived similarity and attractiveness were positively associated with parasocial relationships. This means that followers are more likely to follow influencers with whom they see as attractive and similar to themselves. This parasocial relationship, in turn, creates a greater interest and purchase intention in the products an influencer shares with their followers (Yuan & Lou, 2020). The results of this study also highlighted the idea that followers will build stronger parasocial relationships with influencers when they believe that they are able to share their own voice with said influencer (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Therefore, this study is important to parasocial phenomena research because of the way it emphasizes the importance of these parasocial relationships in the context of social media influencers and how that can affect purchasing intentions.

As research has grown in this field, a stronger differentiation has been made between parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions. I will discuss parasocial interactions in the next section.

Parasocial Interactions

Parasocial interactions are defined as “a sense of mutual interaction with the media figure during the media exposure” (Tukachinsky et al., p. 869, 2020). These mutual interactions can involve talking to the media figure or even a subjective feeling amongst the media figure that they are aware of the audience (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). These relationships and interactions do not interact to influence each other, but they come together at different instances. Some audiences interact with individuals that they do not have relationships with, and others may have relationships with individuals that they do not interact with. Therefore, media users can have strong PSR’s with the absence of a PSI, and a PSI could also be present with a “character” or media figure that they do not have a strong PSR with (Tukachinsky et al., 2020).

Parasocial interaction research has come a long way since its inception and distinction from parasocial relationships, which was coined in 1956. When parasocial interactions first began being researched, it largely focused on soap opera characters and news anchors (Aytulun & Sunai, 2020). As the years have passed, the area of research study has evolved. Later, interactions were studied with television and radio show hosts in the 90’s. Fields of study even expanded to include comedians, romance novels, and computer games. In the digital age, research on these parasocial interactions has shifted to influencers on YouTube, TikTok, and other social media platforms (Aytulun & Sunai, 2020). Different variables are measured depending on the outcome of the study, but one

of the most confused concepts with parasocial interactions is identification. This typically means an individual is experiencing the media character's events in their life. However, parasocial interactions may not include identification with these characters (Aytulun & Sunai, 2020). These interactions have since been studied in popular genres like reality television.

Further exploring parasocial interactions, Tian and Yoo (2015) performed a study about parasocial interactions on a health-related reality television show called *The Biggest Loser*. The differing idea of parasocial interactions did not become widely researched until Cohen defined it in 1999. As parasocial relationships could be used as a “replacement” for real-life interpersonal relationships, parasocial interactions can also be seen as an alternative to interpersonal interactions with one’s social circle. The study focusing on *The Biggest Loser* talks about parasocial interaction as well as identification. These two phenomena are not to be confused with one another. Identification focuses on how audience members experience and interpret the text (Tian & Yoo, 2015). By measuring these two phenomena together, researchers strived to find a link between having a parasocial interaction with media figures and if that was in any way correlated with how an audience identified with that media figure.

This study focused on a quantitative approach, using undergraduate students at Midwestern University as their sample pool. The final sample included 176 undergraduate students with an average age of 25.8 years old (Tian & Yoo, 2015). Five variables were measured to answer their hypotheses: parasocial interaction, exposure, exercise self-efficacy, identification and exercise behavior. To properly measure parasocial interaction, Tian and Yoo used the scale for parasocial interaction developed

by Rubin and Perse in 1987. This measure included eight different variables with likert-type scales ranging from 1-7, 1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree. The results of this study found that parasocial interactions were positively associated with identification. Reality television shows are positively associated with both parasocial interaction and identification, meaning that the more frequently an audience member views the show, the more likely they are to interact and identify with the media figures on the show itself (Tian & Yoo, 2015). This study is notable to parasocial interaction research and to my study as they both involve reality television stars, and what it is like to interact with media figures that more closely relate to them as individuals than other celebrities. This study is significant to current literature on parasocial interaction as it truly set it apart from parasocial relationships and went on to create an extended model for parasocial interactions.

Measuring Parasocial Relationships

After parasocial phenomena was established in literature, Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) created a parasocial interactions scale. However, later, this scale was later found to be more representative of parasocial relationships than interactions (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). This scale lacks validity in measuring parasocial interaction because it is not consistent with the original definition given for parasocial interactions as defined by Horton and Wohl. This scale is also not indicative of conceptual refinements to this phenomenon in recent years (Dibble et al., 2016).

This parasocial interaction scale by Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) was originally created to measure parasocial interactions with newscasters. This is the most used scale when it comes to measuring parasocial relationships. Unfortunately, as the

literature in this field has grown, this scale's validity has been called into question. Some researchers argue that it measures theoretical constructs other than PSR's, like identification, affinity, and perceived realism (Tukachinsky, 2010). The scale works on a 5-point likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) and has 20 items discussing parasocial interactions with newscasters.

Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) came up with a new version of the old parasocial interaction scale called the Experience of Parasocial Interaction Scale or EPSI. This newer scale is said to augment the original ideas of Horton and Wohl with more up to date insights about social-psychological interaction (Dibble et al., 2016). These scholars also provided a new update for parasocial interaction and believed their experiences should be described as follows: "characterized by a felt reciprocity with a TV performer that comprises a sense of mutual awareness, attention, and adjustment" (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011, p. 1107). Certain cues by media figures trigger activities that encourage a parasocial experience, including bodily-addressing cues and eye gazing (Dibble et al., 2016).

This EPSI scale was derived from an initial pool of 38 items. These items measured an audience member's sense of mutual attention, mutual awareness, and mutual adjustment with the TV performer (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). A final set of six items was chosen from the original 38 item pool. These six items not only represented good psychometric qualities but also the theoretical constructs in a conceivable way. The higher the scores, the more intense the parasocial experience (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). All items were measured with a 7-point likert-scale ranging from 1 (*I do not agree at all*) to 7 (*I totally agree*). The final EPSI scale is shown in table 2 below.

The Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction scale, or CPPI, is designed to measure how media audiences form parasocial relationships with celebrities or other popular media figures (Bocarnea & Brown, 2007). Most parasocial interaction scales are designed to measure the intensity of these said relationships, however CPPI is different in that it seeks to measure this phenomenon exceeding just television programs. The validity of this scale is good. Its criterion consistently predicts identification with popular celebrities and is also predicted by media exposure to celebrities and persona (Bocarnea & Brown, 2007). The CPPI includes 20 likert-scale items to answer. These items range on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Now that we have laid out the most popular and common ways to measure both parasocial relationships and interactions, I will discuss the effects of these parasocial phenomena in the next section.

Effects of Parasocial Relationships

While previous studies on parasocial relationships and interactions have focused on the strength and intensity of said relationships, an important factor to consider is what effect these relationships have on individuals. There is less literature written on specific effects of these relationships on individuals, but some will be discussed here.

Currently, there has been some research discussing how parasocial relationships and interactions influence an individual's self-esteem. Derrick, Gabriel and Tippin (2008) performed three separate studies with psychology undergraduate students that discussed how parasocial relationships helped low self-esteem individuals become closer to their ideal selves. In study 1, 100 participants were involved and had all indicated that they had a celebrity or media figure of the same sex that they deeply admired, respect or are

interested in. After completing a survey including the self-esteem scale from Rosenberg (1965), the results of this first study found that greater perceived similarity between the ideal self and the celebrity was associated with lower self-esteem and greater perceived similarity with the celebrity and the actual self, resulted in higher self-esteem (Derrick et al., 2008). While this information is nice to have, it did not discuss the benefits that can be had from parasocial relationships. This was more focused on in study 2.

In study 2, a larger sample of 168 undergraduate students at a public university participated in the study. Participants were asked to write about their favorite same-sex celebrity for six minutes while those in the control group were asked to write about Regis Philbin for six minutes. The results of this study found that individuals with low self-esteem became closer to their ideal self when primed with their favorite celebrity (Derrick et al., 2008). Therefore, feeling close to celebrities or media figures can have a positive effect on one's self-esteem.

Study 3 of this article sought to find out whether the positive impacts of being primed with their favorite celebrity were unique to parasocial relationships. This study includes eighty undergraduate students. As in study 2, there was a group that wrote about their favorite same-sex celebrity for six minutes, a group that wrote about Regis Philbin for six minutes, and a separate group that wrote about their significant other for six minutes (Derrick et al., 2008). A group discussing one's significant other was included in this study to be able to compare close relationships with parasocial relationships. The results of this study found that low self-esteem individuals primed with their favorite celebrity, but not with a significant other, became closer to their ideal self (Derrick et al,

2008). Therefore, it can be concluded that parasocial relationships can have a positive effect on helping an individual reach their full potential.

Not only can parasocial relationships and interactions allow for an individual with low self-esteem to feel closer to their ideal self, but it also has the potential to play a role in helping the environment. Research has been done on the topic of “greenfluencing,” purchasing products that are friendly to the environment. Greenwashing can include misleading or unsubstantiated statements about products (Breves & Liebers, 2022). Due to greenwashing, consumers have a hard time believing green advertisements: enter social media influencers. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, social media influencers have thrived as more people have been spending their time online. Therefore, social media influencers have been introduced as persuasive communicators, and the more followers they gain, the more valuable they can be.

When an individual has been following an influencer for a long period of time, they can create that interpersonal relationship with them. Due to the nature of social media, most influencers create content daily and invite their audiences into their daily lives (Breves & Liebers, 2022). At this stage, audiences view social media influencers as a trustworthy friend, thus they can use some persuasive power. Interviews were done to test this theory with six participants in Germany. The results of this study showed that individuals that identified with a more intense parasocial relationship with these influencers view an influencer’s motives as more effective than calculative. Therefore, an influencer’s followers tend to view a product more favorably and have higher purchase intention than typical advertisements (Breves & Liebers, 2022).

Parasocial relationships can have positive effects on an individual both in relation to their mental health and when it comes to making informed purchasing decisions. These relationships may look different than they used to with some of these studies emphasizing parasocial relationships and interactions with influencers, but their importance remains the same. In terms of this study, individuals that identify with having one of these relationships with the cast of *Dance Moms* can also experience the effects of positive mental health attributes and purchasing intent.

There are two different, competing variables that apply to PSR development, the substitution hypothesis and the Panksepp-Jakobson hypothesis. These two competing hypotheses share different ideas as to why people may develop these parasocial relationships and interactions. It's important to consider these two positions to determine how this parasocial phenomena can play a role in their lives and how it can affect them later. **The Substitution Hypothesis**

Parasocial relationships were initially embedded in the uses and gratifications framework. The uses and gratifications theory has been studied since the early 1940's when researchers wondered why different audiences engaged in certain media content (Ruggiero, 2000). Individuals usually seek media to satisfy different cognitive, emotional, social, and other sociopsychological needs. Along with these needs, media dependency theory comes into play. An individual's media dependency is high when their goal satisfaction relies on gaining information from the media system. Media influence is determined by the affiliation between society, the media, and its audience (Ruggerio, 2000). These parasocial relationships offer media user's a sense of belonging by being a motivational driver in pursuit of companionship (Tukachinsky et al., 2020).

The heart of the substitution hypothesis lies in the idea that one-sided relationships offer these social experiences without the need for polished social skills or the risk of rejection. Those that have poor interpersonal skills may lack the ability to create close relationships, which causes them to seek compensation for that from areas of mass media. Individuals that struggle to form meaningful social relationships in their personal lives due to personality characteristics will then be more likely to watch television which will then lead to a higher level of parasocial interaction with media figures (Tsao, 1996). As parasocial relationships can be related to an unfulfilling social life, it is also important to look at attachment styles and the formation of these PSR's.

Different attachment styles can be predictors in determining why individuals have parasocial relationships with media figures and, in turn, how strong these relationships may be. Attachment styles predict more than just different patterns in child development but can also serve as an indicator for their parasocial relationships with media figures (Cohen, 2004). There are three main types of attachment styles, all of which develop during childhood. People with secure attachment styles tend to feel comfortable with others and have positive feelings about their relationships and find it easy to get close to others. Those with avoidant attachment style tend to think more negatively about relationships, distrust people and avoid seeking out intimate relationships with others. Individuals that have anxious attachment styles do want to seek out those intimate relationships, but they tend to distrust people and become overly dependent on them (Cohen, 2004). Therefore, even though relationships with media figures may be less intimate than personal relationships, they may still react in similar ways if they were to be separated from each other. Audiences can also infer that this applies to positive feelings

(Cohen, 2004). Thus, this perspective could mean that inadequacies in one's personal social circle will potentially result in stronger parasocial relationships.

The Panksepp-Jakobson Hypothesis

While the substitution hypothesis focused on parasocial relationships as a substitute for their own social relationships, the Panksepp-Jakobson hypothesis focuses on the idea of parasocial relationships as an extension of an individual's social circle (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). For example, individuals that seek out intimate personal relationships in their own social lives will also then seek out intimate parasocial relationships. Similarly, those that shy away from connecting with others in their personal lives will also shy away from forming parasocial relationships with media figures (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). The human brain does not differentiate the processes between developing relationships with one's social circle and media figures. Therefore, humans are wired to respond to media figures in similar ways to those in their own social circle (Steven, 2017). When making connections between social and PSR's, two variables produced the most results, homophily and interpersonal attraction (Tukachinsky et al., 2020).

Homophily

Homophily refers to an individual being similar in their beliefs, education, attitudes, physical appearance, personality, and background (Cortez, 1991). Essentially, people tend to seek out strong relationships with individuals that they view as similar to themselves. There are also two different ways that scholars view homophily, objectively and subjectively. Objective homophily is the seen similarities between two individuals and subjective homophily is the perceived similarity between two individuals. Subjective

homophily is more closely related to frequency of interaction and interpersonal interaction than objective homophily (Cortez, 1991). However, most research has focused on objective homophily.

Sex

There are also gender differences in experiencing personal relationships. Gender refers to socially constructed characteristics of men and women and boys and girls. This can include norms and behaviors associated with each gender. However, gender varies from society to society and can change over time (World Health Organization, 2019). Women tend to hold their relationships to higher standards expecting a deeper level of self-disclosure and greater levels of loyalty than their male counterparts (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). Sex does not only play a role in the effect of one's relationship, the sex of those with whom they have an interpersonal relationship also matters. Most individuals prefer to have same-sex friendships as they find them more personally rewarding. Thus, same-sex friendships are more prevalent and durable over time (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). There is a correlation between sex and homophily. A dissertation study found that homophily is a factor in parasocial relationship development with a same-sex television personality (Cortez, 1991). McCroskey, Richmond and Daly's scale (1975) described homophily as a multidimensional construct and found that perceived homophily is directly related to parasocial interaction.

Gender continues to play a role in parasocial relationships. Women and girls are more likely than men and boys to name a character of the opposite sex as their favorite on television (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). Women are generally more open to cross-sex parasocial relationships than men. The tendency for women to pick a favorite character of

the opposite sex was seen even when a show featured an equal number of both male and female characters (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). Research has found that gender differences in same-sex character preferences is prevalent, but it is still unclear how this specifically relates to parasocial relationships. More studies need to be performed about the intensity of parasocial relationships and gender to further cement this connection. In the case of this study, most of the viewers of *Dance Moms* and survey participants will likely be female as this show was tailored around young female dancers and their mothers.

Exposure

The amount of time that one is exposed to media figures also plays a role in the strength of their parasocial relationship. After 30 hours of watching that media figure in its context, the relationship moves from acquaintanceship to casual relationship. Good friendships then evolve after 140 hours of the relationship (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). What takes place during these interactions also plays a role in the strength of the PSR. Joking, expressing affection, and self-disclosure have been theorized to foster stronger friendships and interpersonal relationships because of a human's desire to belong (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). In the context of these parasocial relationships, this time refers to how long an audience member has spent watching or attempting to interact with the media figure. The more time "spent" with these figures, the more an individual engages with them vicariously. Thus, the more time they have spent with media figures, the more invested individuals become in that relationship (Tukachinsky et al., 2020).

Parasocial Relationships & Well-Being

The impact of parasocial relationships on wellbeing provides a useful context for exploring how these competing hypotheses play out, because there is evidence to support

both claims. Utilizing social media platforms to further interact with media figures by liking, reposting and commenting on their content further strengthens the parasocial relationship between an individual and their chosen media figure (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Those that an individual chooses to spend time and create relationships with typically have an influence on that individual and the choices that they make. Similarly, a parasocial relationship with a media figure may also have an influence on an individual (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Different health issues have been displayed on social media in the past few years, the most common being COVID-19. When different media figures post health information on their own social media pages or discuss it on television, audiences are more likely to seek out health information. After Tom Hanks publicly shared his COVID-19 diagnosis on social media, audiences reported feeling more involved with Hanks and were more willing to participate in prevention behaviors for the illness (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). These parasocial relationships do not only influence physical health, but also mental health.

Mental health has repeatedly been brought up in the media in the last several years, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic. Celebrities have now begun to share their own struggles and experiences with mental health on social media. Spiderman star Tom Holland expressed how being on social media was “detrimental” to his own mental health, noting that he took a break from the platforms to feel better about himself (Bresge, 2022). One of the few posts that he had made after taking this break was one to support charitable organizations, including a teen mental health organization (Bresge, 2022). Pop singer Selena Gomez has worked with mental health causes, even producing the show *13 Reasons Why*, a Netflix drama about teen mental health and suicide (Smith,

2018). When celebrities like this speak out about their own struggles with social media and mental health, it reduces the stigma surrounding this conversation with their audiences and self-efficacy in dealing with these conditions (Hoffner & Bond, 2022).

Social media use has been linked to depression, low self-esteem, and appearance anxiety (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Therefore, celebrities have also advocated for social media breaks in the media. Audiences may compare themselves to said media figures that present unrealistic images of their lived experiences, something prevalent with influencer culture today (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Influencers today are seen as the embodiment of popularity and beauty, which makes it so easy for audiences to become invested in their personal lives on the internet. Aspirational content has become more popular as influencer culture has made its rise on TikTok, this includes individuals showcasing the use of luxurious products which influences their audience to obtain similar products to seem more like them (Bareth, 2023). However, the social comparison that can occur between an influencer and their audience can be a negative experience. When someone has a parasocial relationship with these people on the internet, they are likely to experience similar feelings. An influencer can promote body dissatisfaction and issues like eating disorders by showcasing unrealistic expectations about body image (Bareth, 2023). Therefore, while there are positive aspects to obtaining a parasocial relationship with media figures online and on social media, there are also negative ramifications for an individual's well-being.

Parasocial Relationships Across Multiple Media Platforms

Parasocial relationships have never been so prevalent. These relationships and interactions can happen across multi-media platforms. Viewing a media figure on

television, following them on social media and interacting with their media content can all be ways that individuals form these relationships. During the COVID-19 pandemic, interpersonal relationships and social interactions were limited globally (Jarzyna, 2021). This created the perfect storm for individuals to lean on parasocial relationships and interactions to fulfill their social needs. This pandemic changed the way individuals interact with one another, leaning more toward social media interactions and the rise of Zoom and other video calls.

As there have been more advancements made digitally in the last 25 years, the way in which individuals share and consume information has changed. Both streamed and social media allow us to engage with content differently than done before (Jarzyna, 2021). Previously, the only opportunity for this engagement lay with the television or radio show that the media figures were involved with. Interacting with these media figures in an online setting has contributed to influencer culture and with that, further begs the question, what is real and what isn't?

Reality television as a meta-genre, as mentioned before, blurs the lines between reality and fiction. This is because there are people cast in the show who are “playing” themselves and are not hired actors (Jarzyn, 2021). Audience members of reality television may find their favorite “characters” on social media to gain insight into whether what is portrayed about them on television is really “true.” When this happens, there is a greater chance of strengthening the parasocial relationship. The relationship between an influencer or media figure, whether it be on one media platform or multiple, is a unique one. Following one’s favorite reality star or media figure on social media after seeing them on television allows for more of a two-way interaction between the

figure/influencer and the audience member (Jarzyna, 2021). A study done by Swan found that consumers on Twitter may have a similar level of trust with influencers on the platform as they do with their close friends (2016). Influencers may differ in these parasocial relationships with celebrities as these influencers rely on content engagement to gain their following, which may make them more inclined to interact with their audiences on these media platforms. Therefore, parasocial relationships play an important role in the value of social media and the influencers that have gained a following (Jarzyna, 2021).

Parasocial interaction is more likely to occur between an audience and celebrity or media figure when there is a conversational style of delivery (Datta, 2019). Reality television adopts that conversational delivery and invites audiences into their own real lives. Some reality television competition shows even invite the audience to interact with the show itself by casting their own votes to keep their favorites on the program. These are shows like *Dancing with the Stars* and *American Idol*. As these celebrities appear more down-to-earth and realistic, an audience member is more likely to seek them out or contact them directly (Chung & Cho, 2014). Hence, other social media platforms are the perfect place for audiences to reach out and further deepen these relationships.

Uses and Gratifications

Research has been conducted to find out what motivates audience members to engage with reality television. These motivations for watching reality television will also play a factor in an audience's development of parasocial relationships with these characters. As previously mentioned, reality television consists of many different sub-genres of television. The number one reason that viewers watch reality television is the

thrill of guessing who will win or be eliminated from the show that week (Ebersole & Woods, 2007). This idea mostly encompasses the competition style reality television, one that *Dance Moms* would also be a part of. The second and third motivations for watching these programs involve seeing individuals face challenging situations and imagining how you yourself would fair in these similar situations (Ebersole & Woods, 2007). This can be applied to *Dance Moms* because of the way young viewers can imagine themselves as dancers and put themselves in their shoes.

Reality television attracts audiences for more than just its entertainment value, but further satisfies an audience's voyeuristic tendencies (Ebersole & Woods, 2007). As a blurring of genres, reality television invites inclusion with their audience members by allowing them to vote for their favorites and ability to present raw and "authentic" footage (Ebersole & Woods, 2007). With that in mind, there is an affinity between motivations for watching reality television and parasocial interaction. Viewers who tend to watch a media figure personality on television will be more likely to create a parasocial relationship with that character (Ebersole & Woods, 2007). This is unique to *Dance Moms* as many viewers of this show have watched the show from the beginning of its airtime, which follows the same set of girls on their journey to become professional dancers. As they watch the "characters" grow up, they become more invested in the relationship they have made with them.

Experiencing parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions with "characters" on television also plays a role in how an audience chooses to make use of said media content. Rubin and Rubin completed research that displayed a correlation between parasocial interaction and being dependent on media content to fulfill certain

personal needs (Ebersole & Woods, 2007). The same research found that individuals with a higher parasocial interaction with a certain media “character” are more likely to rely on that relationship to fulfill their need for social companionship (Ebersole & Woods, 2007). Perceived realism also plays a role in both the motivations for watching reality television and an individual’s ability to create parasocial relationships with the individuals on the show. The more real an audience member perceives the content on the show to be, the more likely they are to create parasocial relationships with the members of that show (Ebersole & Woods, 2007).

The show *Dance Moms* has not been on the air since 2019, and cast members have since explained different elements of the show. Audience viewers were drawn to the drama between the mothers and their dance teacher, Abby Lee Miller. Since leaving the show, Abby herself has cleared up some elements that have long been questioned by audiences. For example, on a podcast appearance, Abby explained that Maddie, her star dancer, had left school early every day to come into the dance studio to learn all the team dances ahead of time, something that has always been denied on the show (Franklyn, 2023). Therefore, it can sometimes be difficult for audiences to determine what they believe is “real” on reality television.

Entertainment is the number one reason most viewers watch reality television, but another motivation worth noting is that some viewers specifically watch that content to support their favorite characters, further cementing their parasocial relationship. Both male and female viewers would choose to watch a reality program for one or more of the so-called “characters” on the show (Patino et al., 2012). Humor and drama have also been found to be driving factors of an audience member’s motivations to engage with the

content. As individuals get older, the need for humor in reality television shows go down, and the need for drama goes up (Patino et al., 2012). Whether they are male or female viewers, the need for drama as viewer age increases remains the same. This is an interesting factor to consider in terms of *Dance Moms* as once a viewer begins watching the content, they themselves are witnessing the so-called “characters” grow up on screen along with them.

Parasocial Relationships on *Dance Moms*

In terms of *Dance Moms*, the original cast members have a large following on social media platforms, despite some of them not having been on the show since 2014. Easily one of Abby Lee Miller’s favorite students on the show, Maddie Ziegler currently has 6.2 million followers on TikTok and an impressive 13.8 million followers on Instagram (Maddie Ziegler, n.d.). Her sister, Mackenzie Ziegler trumps her sister’s following with 23.5 million followers on TikTok (Mackenzie Ziegler, n.d.) and 14.8 million followers on Instagram (Kenzie, n.d.). Since their leave from the show in 2016, both sisters have been working professionally, Maddie being the dancer for music artist Sia, and Mackenzie beginning a music career of her own. Her latest single, *Anatomy*, has been streamed over 12 million times on Spotify since its release earlier this year. This study is largely going to focus on parasocial relationships across different media platforms looking at *Dance Moms* specifically.

This study is going to measure both parasocial relationships and parasocial interaction. Parasocial relationships are described as that lingering feeling of connectedness to a media personality (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). This research study is going to focus on what draws an individual to follow these media figures on more than

one platform, after having seen them in the reality television setting. Thus, it makes sense to measure what type of feelings intensify with a media figure, assuming that is what leads to following them on other platforms. It is also going to be important to measure parasocial interactions. After following these media figures on other platforms, audience members may engage with their content by liking, commenting, or participating in live streams. Therefore, these specific interactions with said media figures would also need to be measured.

RQ1: With which “character” from *Dance Moms* do participants have the strongest parasocial relationship?

RQ2: What is the relationship between the amount of time spent watching the show and participant engagement with show content on other platforms?

H1a: The strength of parasocial relationships will be positively associated with the number of media platforms an individual follows the media figure on.

H1b: The strength of parasocial interactions will be positively associated with the number of media platforms an individual follows the media figure on.

H2a: The length of time individuals has followed the media figure on media platforms will be positively associated with strength of parasocial relationships.

H2b: The length of time individuals has followed the media figure on media platforms will be positively associated with strength of parasocial interactions.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Now that I have discussed this study's purpose and the literature's background, I will describe the methodology. In this chapter, I discuss my quantitative methodology and the sample involved. I will lay out my survey design and distribution, instrumentation, and sample.

Design

I created a cross-sectional survey using QuestionPro. Then, the study received IRB approval (#IRB-2401008-EXM) before initiation. Participants were then recruited through various means. Once they entered the survey, an informed consent was presented to participants. The consent form overviewed inclusion criteria, information about the potential risks and benefits of the study, and that they can quit the survey anytime. They then clicked that they agreed, which takes them to start the survey. If they clicked they do not agree, are under 18, or are not familiar with *Dance Moms*, the survey was terminated. Then, participants completed a variety of measures described below.

Sampling

For this study, I used purposive, convenience, snowball, and volunteer sampling techniques. The sample was purposive, because participants had to meet these criteria: 18+ years old and interacted with *Dance Moms* through some form of media. Opening the survey to students at South Dakota State University represents our convenience sampling, as I face time and cost restraints. The snowball method was an ideal sampling strategy for me because I introduced my study to populations like my students, which then caused them to talk about it with others, thus increasing my sample size (Treadwell & Davis, 2020). Included in the snowball method is volunteering. Volunteering was the only way you can begin to gain research participants as no one was forced to take the survey, which then leads to recruitment strategies (Treadwell & Davis, 2020).

Recruitment messages were initially posted on my personal Snapchat and Instagram pages, School of Communication and Journalism (COJO) social media pages, and other COJO communication channels (email and D2L). The messages were also shared via Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, X, and Reddit. Recruitment messages were shared in specific subreddits, and Facebook pages dedicated to fans of the show. These forums serve as a place for fans to discuss specific content from the show and share their own thoughts and opinions on different cast members. In the recruitment messages, audiences were encouraged to share the survey link with their social networks.

Sample

After removing bots and ineligible participants, 180 responses were used for data analysis. Most participants were women (95%), white (81.4%) and an average age of 25 ($SD = 7.4$) years old. Additional identities refer to those that identify as male (3%), non-binary (2%) or other (1%). Additional races and identities refer to those that marked Hispanic/Latino (5%), Black/African American (8%), Asian/Pacific Islander (3%), or self-described as a race not listed (1%).

All participants were familiar with the *Dance Moms* show and had encountered its content at some point. Three-fourths (75%) of the participants reported watching the TV show through broadcast TV; 86% watched it on streaming platforms. Over half (53%) of participants had seen every episode, with another 40% having seen more than one season. Only 20% of participants followed the official show accounts on social media, whereas 53% of participants followed specific cast members. More than 4 out of 5 participants (83%) reported encountering *Dance Moms* content on their feed or “For You” page of their social media accounts. For those who first encountered the show on social media, 68% went back and watched the show. For those who first encountered the TV show, 61% then sought out *Dance Moms* content elsewhere, including social media.

Instrumentation

Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationship strength with the cast as a whole, and with each character, were measured with single items with the stem: “rate the strength of your relationship with [character]” using a Likert-type response scale (1 = pretty weak, 2 = somewhat weak, 3 = somewhere in the middle, 4 = somewhat strong, 5 = pretty strong). Participants then selected which dancer they had the strongest relationship with. That character’s name was piped into the items on the CPPIS and EPSI scales.

The Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale (Bocarnea & Brown, 2007) was used to measure an individual’s feelings about the relationship they have with the cast member that they indicated they have the strongest relationship with. The scale included 20 items using a Likert response scale. Example items of this scale include I would like to meet [celebrity or persona] in person, and I see [celebrity or persona] as a down to earth person. The scale was reliable, $\alpha = .99$. In this sample, parasocial interactions were moderate, $M = 3.0$ ($SD = 0.7$).

Parasocial Interactions

The Experience of Parasocial Interaction Scale (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011) was used to measure the strength of an individual’s relationship with the media figure they with whom they are engaging. All participants completed the EPSI for the cast as a whole. The scale included six items using a Likert response scale. The scale was reliable, $\alpha = .93$. In this sample, parasocial interactions were low, $M = 1.5$ ($SD = 0.8$).

Time Spent with Content

Participants responded to an open-ended question asking how many years they had been engaging with *Dance Moms* content, including the TV show and any social

media platforms. Engagement in this sample ranged from less than a year to 15 years. Over a third of participants (36.6%) had engaged with this content for 10 years or more. The median time spent was 7 years; $M = 6.8$ years ($SD = 4.4$ years).

Points of Engagement with Content

General engagement across platforms was measured with 5 items using a dichotomous response scale (yes = 1, no = 0). Participants indicated whether they 1) watched the show on broadcast, 2) watched the show on streaming, 3) followed the show on social media, 4) followed member(s) of the cast on social media, 5) saw *Dance Moms* content on their feed or “For You” page. Scores on the items were summed, so that cross-platform engagement scores could range from 0 to 5. Scores were evenly distributed, $M = 3.2$ ($SD = 1.0$).

Social media engagement with the show on specific platforms was measured with 4 items using a dichotomous response scale (yes = 1, no = 0). Participants indicated whether they followed show content on TikTok, Facebook, X (Twitter), and Instagram. Scores on the items were summed, so that social media engagement scores could range from 0 to 4. Scores were negatively skewed, $M = 1.7$ ($SD = 1.0$).

Social media engagement for each dancer on each platform was measured with 28 items (4 platforms x 7 characters [Maddie, Mackenzie, Nia, Chloe, Kendall, Brooke, and Paige]) using dichotomous response options (yes = 1, no = 0). Table 2 shows the number of platforms on which participants followed each dancer. These scores were combined to create an overall score of social media engagement with the dancers; scores could range from 0 to 28. Close to half of the sample (47%) did not follow any of the individual dancers. Of those who did follow individual dancers, scores ranged from 1 to 28. On

average, these participants engaged with the dancers in 7 ways ($SD = 5.7$), which could be a combination of following a few dancers on many platforms or following a lot of dancers on one platform. Regardless, these are points of engagement with content from the dancers.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In this chapter I will discuss the results of my two research questions and my two hypotheses. To answer the research questions and test the hypotheses, I used descriptive statistics and correlation analyses (including Pearson's r , Spearman's ρ , and Kendall's τ). These results will be interpreted more deeply in chapter five.

Parasocial Relationship Strength (RQ1)

RQ1 focused on identifying which "character" on the show, including mothers, daughters, and Abby Lee, participants identified as having the strongest relationship with. Participants were asked if they feel they have a relationship with In response to RQ1, single item scores indicated an individual's perceived relationship strength with each character. The results show that the strongest relationships were reported with Christi ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.5$), Kendall ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.4$), and Holly ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 1.5$).

Table 4 Perceived Relationship Strength

Character	Self-Reported Relationship Strength (single-item)
Christi ($n = 46$)	2.59 ($SD = 1.5$)
Kendall ($n = 46$)	2.54 ($SD = 1.4$)
Holly ($n = 44$)	2.45 ($SD = 1.5$)
Abby Lee ($n = 8$)	2.38 ($SD = 1.1$)
Maddie ($n = 47$)	2.23 ($SD = 1.4$)
Mackenzie ($n = 47$)	2.17 ($SD = 1.4$)
Nia ($n = 46$)	2.37 ($SD = 1.5$)
Chloe ($n = 45$)	1.91 ($SD = 1.2$)
Brooke ($n = 47$)	2.34 ($SD = 1.5$)
Paige ($n = 46$)	2.15 ($SD = 1.4$)
Melissa ($n = 44$)	2.05 ($SD = 1.3$)
Jill ($n = 44$)	2.05 ($SD = 1.2$)
Kelli ($n = 44$)	2.25 ($SD = 1.5$)

Participants were then asked which character they had the strongest relationship with. Most commonly ($n = 139$), participants reported that they did not have a relationship with any of the dancers or Abby Lee. Table 5 lists the characters in order of how many participants indicated having the strongest relationship with.

After indicating who individuals identified as having the strongest relationship with, the scores on the parasocial relationship scale (CCPIS) determined that the highest rated characters were Christi ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0$), Nia ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.5$), and Holly ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.7$). In turn, scores on the parasocial interactions scale were also reported. In this instance, the highest rated characters were Holly ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.9$), Abby Lee ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.7$), and Kendall ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 0.0$).

Table 5 Strongest Relationships and CPPIS

Participant Reported “Strongest Relationship”	CPPIS Score
Maddie ($n = 8$)	2.82 ($SD = 0.7$)
Mackenzie ($n = 8$)	2.73 ($SD = 0.8$)
Chloe ($n = 8$)	3.26 ($SD = 0.7$)
Brooke ($n = 5$)	2.50 ($SD = 0.8$)
Holly ($n = 4$)	3.46 ($SD = 0.7$)
Nia ($n = 2$)	3.53 ($SD = 1.5$)
Abby Lee ($n = 2$)	3.40 ($SD = 0.5$)
Kelly ($n = 2$)	3.03 ($SD = 0.5$)
Kendall ($n = 1$)	3.20 ($SD = 0.0$)
Christi ($n = 1$)	3.95 ($SD = 0.0$)
No one ($n = 139$)	--

Participant Engagement (RQ2)

RQ2 focused on the relationship, if any, between the amount of time spent watching the show and participant engagement with the show content on other platforms. In answer to RQ2, there was no relationship between how long they have watched the show and how long they had been engaging with the content on social media, r_s ($df = 178$) = .08, $p = .307$. There was no relationship between time spent watching the show and time spent engaging with the content on TikTok, r_t ($df = 178$) = .06, $p = .28$, and Facebook, r_t ($df = 178$) = -0.03, $p = .56$; or X, r_t ($df = 178$) = .09, $p = .15$. However, the longer they have been watching the show, the longer they have engaged with the content on Instagram, r_t ($df = 178$) = .16, $p = .007$.

Parasocial Relationships (H1a & H2a)

H1a predicted that the strength of parasocial relationships, as measured by the CCPIS, would be positively associated with the number of media platforms that an individual follows these “characters” on. The CCPIS was tailored to ask the participant about the specific dancer they felt they had the strongest relationship with; only 41 participants felt they had a strong enough relationship with a dancer to select a specific one. Regardless of which dancer they chose, CPPIS was positively related to the number of platforms a participant followed the show on, $r(41) = .42, p = .006$, as well as the number of platforms on which they followed individual cast members, $r(41) = .55, p < .001$.

In addition to measuring parasocial relationships with the CCPIS, we created single-item measures of relationship strength for the cast as a whole, as well as for each character. There was a positive relationship between points of engagement with social media and strength of parasocial relationship with the cast as a whole [single-item measure], $r(178) = .47, p < .001$. There was also a positive relationship between points of engagement with social media and relationship strength (single-item self-report) for Maddie, $r(47) = .39, p = .006$; Mackenzie, $r(47) = .43, p = .002$; Nia, $r(46) = .44, p = .002$; Chloe, $r(45) = .38, p = .009$; Kendall, $r(46) = .42, p = .004$; Brooke, $r(47) = .36, p = .014$; and Paige, $r(46) = .44, p = .002$.

H2a predicted that the strength of parasocial relationships would be positively associated with the length of time individuals have followed the cast and/or certain characters on a given media platform. First, I will discuss the test of this hypothesis using the CCPIS. Again, only participants who specified having a favorite character completed the CCPIS. This hypothesis was partially supported for the CCPIS measure of parasocial relationship strength. The strength of parasocial relationships (CPPIS) with any cast member was positively related to the amount of time participants had followed the show/cast on TikTok, $r(41) = .33, p = .035$; X, $r(41) = .37, p = .047$; and Instagram, r

(41) = .42, $p = .007$. Length of time following the cast/show on Facebook was *not* positively related to strength of parasocial relationship, $r(41) = .13, p = .432$.

When looking at the single-item measures, there were mixed findings. For Maddie, parasocial relationship strength was positively associated with time spent following her on Instagram, $r(47) = .29, p = .048$. For Chloe, parasocial relationship strength was positively associated with time spent following her on Facebook, $r(45) = .39, p = .008$, and on Instagram, $r(45) = .35, p = .017$. For Melissa, parasocial relationship strength was positively associated with time spent following her on Facebook, $r(44) = .50, p < .001$, and on Instagram, $r(44) = .50, p < .001$. There was no association between time spent following the cast/show on any platform and the strength of parasocial relationship with the cast as a whole. There was also no association between time spent watching the show and parasocial relationship strength for the whole cast or individual members.

Parasocial Interactions (H1b & H2b) EPSI

Recall that, unlike scores on the CPPIS which deal with parasocial relationships with individual characters, scores on the EPSI represent participants' parasocial *interactions* with the cast *as a whole*. H1b predicted a positive relationship between parasocial interactions (as measured by the EPSI) and points of engagement with social media. This hypothesis was supported. There was a positive relationship between points of engagement with social media and strength of parasocial interactions with the cast as a whole, $r(180) = .42, p < .001$.

H2b predicted a positive relationship between parasocial interactions with the cast as a whole and length of time individuals have followed the cast on a given media platform. This hypothesis was supported for TikTok, $r(180) = .15, p = .039$; X, $r(180) = .21, p = .004$; and Instagram, $r(180) = .17, p = .020$. It was not supported for Facebook, $r(180) = .11, p = .159$.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Parasocial relationships and interactions are prominent in society right now as new social media platforms are being created every day. Results of my study will be discussed more deeply here. In this section, I discuss the theoretical and practical implications, future research directions and potential limitations of this study.

RQ 1 asked participants which character they felt they had the strongest relationship with. This was measured in two different ways. First, individuals were asked to identify their relationship status with each character listed on a Likert-based scale ranging from 1-5, one being very weak and five being very strong. The results of this single-item measurement showed that the strongest relationships were with Christi, Kendall and Holly. Then, we looked at the results for which characters participants had the strongest relationship with by looking at their scores in terms of the parasocial relationship and parasocial interactions scales. The parasocial relationship scale indicated that the strongest parasocial relationships were with Christi, Nia and Holly. The parasocial interactions scale indicated that the strongest parasocial relationships were with Holly, Abby Lee, and Kendall.

RQ2 sought to identify what the relationship was between the amount of time watching the show and participant engagement with the show on other platforms. The results showed that there is no relationship between how long audiences have watched the show and how long they have been engaging with the show content on social media. Perhaps one of our more surprising results revealed that there is no relationship between time spent watching the show and time spent engaging with the content on TikTok. However, there were a few exceptions to this in the survey results. The longer that individuals watched the show, the longer they have engaged with the content on Instagram.

H1a predicted that the strength of parasocial relationships will be positively associated with the number of media platform individuals follow the media figure on.

H1b predicted that the strength of parasocial interactions will be positively associated with the number of media platforms individuals follow the media figure on. Both of these hypotheses are supported for every dancer that was listed from the show. The more media channels they follow the cast member on, the stronger their parasocial relationship and interaction with them.

H2a predicted that the length of time individuals has followed the media figure on media platforms will be positively associated with the strength of their parasocial relationship. H2b predicted that the length of time individuals has followed the media figure on media platforms will be positively associated with the strength of their parasocial interaction. These hypotheses were supported for each dancer except for one: Kendall on X. There was a positive association between time spent following *Dance Moms* content on TikTok and perceived parasocial relationships and interactions with the cast. There was also a positive association between time spent following *Dance Moms* content on Instagram and perceived parasocial relationships and interactions with the cast. There was a positive association with following *Dance Moms* content on X and perceived parasocial relationships with the cast, but no association between time spent following the content on X and parasocial interactions. There was no association between time spent following *Dance Moms* content on Facebook and parasocial relationships or interactions.

Other informative results from this survey indicated that 36% of the participant sample has been engaging with *Dance Moms* content on media platforms for over ten years. When asked to indicate how “real” they thought the show was when they first started watching or engaging with the content, participants indicated that they thought it was somewhat real ($M = 1.89$), ($SD = .811$). However, when asked again based on what they have seen now, less people believe in the “realness” of the show ($M = 2.59$), ($SD = .650$). The higher the number, the less “real” they believe the show to be.

Theoretical Implications

This survey included two scales that measure parasocial relationships and interactions, the Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale (Bocarnea & Brown, 2007) and the Experience of Parasocial Interaction Scale (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011).

The Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interactions scale was originally designed to measure how media figures and consumers create parasocial relationships. This scale was created to particularly measure parasocial relationships that exceed just television viewing (Bocarnea & Brown, 2007). However, the scale itself, with its 20 items of likert-type statements, seems to be more indicative of measuring a relationship. Most of these statements are about how the consumer or audience member feels about the media figure. This measures more relationship strength variables than measuring interactions across more than one platform, for which the scale was originally created.

Therefore, the name of this scale is itself misleading. Social media began gaining popularity in the mid-2000's, and this scale was created in 2007 (Mutabazi, 2023). If this scale was truly aiming to measure the formation of parasocial relationships stemming beyond just television, it stands to reason that some of the questions asked would indicate the consumer having seen the media figure elsewhere. In this study, specific questions were asked about social media engagement with each cast member to measure the development of these relationships across multiple platforms. The creators of this scale seem to use the words relationship and interaction interchangeably when referring to parasocial phenomena. This seems contradictory as previous literature has emphasized the differences between parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions.

The Experience of Parasocial Interaction Scale was created in 2011 to assess the intensity of a viewer's parasocial experience with TV performers (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). This scale seemed to aim to include more of the media figure's perspective by asking consumers how aware they felt the TV performer was of them. In terms of its content, the scale only had six criteria all answered with a Likert-type scale ranging from 1-7. To accurately measure the intensity of a parasocial experience, it may

be more worthwhile to measure the frequency of certain things happening within these interactions.

As it was created in 2011, this scale should take an approach that includes more than just a television experience. Social media is more indicative of a two-way interaction with media figures and consumers than a television performer may have. In terms of measurements, this scale does not widely measure these variables very differently than the original Parasocial Interaction Scale (1985). Though it is called the Parasocial Interaction Scale, critics have argued that it may be more indicative of measuring parasocial relationships. The same could be said for the EPSI, as an individual must have strong feelings for the media figure to indicate a higher number of feelings for the statements indicated. The current parasocial literature still identifies the original Parasocial Interactions Scale (1985) as being the most widely used scale to measure parasocial relationships, so the EPSI may not have accomplished what it sought out.

In terms of future parasocial research, changing the phrasing of “parasocial relationships” may allow for data to be more indicative of the connection between individuals and media figures. In this study, certain questions asked participants to use a likert-based scale to identify how strong their relationship was with certain cast members. When reviewing results, quite a few responses indicated that they did not feel they had a relationship with that cast member despite following them on social media channels or interacting with their content. This leads me to believe that the term “relationship” may not be the best one to adequately describe the connection between viewer and media figure. Therefore, changing this language may lead to more accurate results in future studies.

Currently, there is not enough literature about the media figure’s side of parasocial relationships and interactions. The scales that have been used to measure parasocial interactions and relationships focus exclusively on how the audience member interacts or feels that the media figure is aware of them. To describe interactions and

engagement with media figures and audience members as a relationship, a more complete picture needs to include that of the media figures themselves.

Research suggests that when celebrities self-disclose personal information about themselves on their social media accounts, consumers are more likely to have parasocial interactions with them (Kim & Song, 2016). With direct access to this personal information, consumers and audience members can feel like they “know” that celebrity or media figure. Currently, there has been some research done regarding the use of social media between celebrities and fans. Most of that research has focused on motivations for following celebrities on social media (Kim & Song, 2016). As social media is the most common form of connection between media figures and consumers, it would be interesting to have more literature measuring how said media figures perceive these interactions. As noted before, it would be beneficial to parasocial research to create a scale that would measure not only parasocial feelings between audience members, but also that of media figures. Measuring their personal interactions with their audiences on social media or other platforms would be able to give a more complete picture of the relationships created between these individuals.

Practical Implications

The results of this study build on the existing research that parasocial feelings do exist with an audience member when engaging with media figures across multiple platforms. When asked to identify a cast member with whom they felt they had the closest relationship, participants were able to identify this based on different Likert scale questions about relationship feelings. Based on this criterion, participants indicated that they had the strongest relationships with Christi, Nia and Holly. At the end of the survey, participants could write any additional thoughts about this topic. Additional information in this section included stories from participants that have grown up watching the show and continued to watch the show on YouTube and then eventually TikTok. Another interesting finding from the study revolved around the idea that there may not be a strong

correlation between how a participant felt about a cast member and how much they engaged with their social media content. For example, on our measurements of the CPPIS, participants felt closer to Maddie than Mackenzie, but engaged more with Mackenzie on social media than Maddie. This could make sense in terms of how much each cast member posts on their social media pages, respectively. Information like this shows that when audience members are exposed to and seek out show content for a long time, they can foster a parasocial experience in relation to that show or media figure. Based on the scales created to measure parasocial relationships, emotions almost certainly play a role in the development and maintenance of parasocial relationships. Measuring emotions specifically should be considered for future studies to discuss how they relate to specific parasocial relationship variables.

Participants of this survey indicated that they followed cast members on social media or engaged with the *Dance Moms* content elsewhere other than the original show on television. In fact, 83% of survey participants revealed that they have seen *Dance Moms* content on their “For You” page on social media. This presents a unique opportunity for companies to market and advertise their products with some of these cast members of social media. Social media marketing also works as relationship marketing, when the main objective is to create a point of contact with consumers that will later assist in incisive purchasing decisions (Guardo et al., 2021). TikTok is one of the fastest growing social media platforms and has over 500 million daily users (Guardo et al., 2021). This represents a unique way for companies to reach younger audiences. As previously mentioned, most survey participants have seen cast members or show content on their “For You” page at some point during their social media use. This allows for consumers to feel closer to these media figures. Consequently, they may be more inclined to be interested in products that they promote. Advertising on TikTok allows for a more personal, segmented way to reach target audiences, effectively getting to know more about their needs and desires as consumers (Guardo et al., 2021).

Understanding parasocial research and relationships is an important variable to consider when brands make advertising decisions. One of the more popular ways for young people to shop is on TikTok shop. Influencers or media figures on these platforms act as go-betweens between consumers and different brands. Research indicates that half of consumers' shopping decisions are impacted by social media influencers (Lin & Nuangjamnong, 2022). Therefore, the relationships that these consumers create with those on social media can affect their purchasing decisions. TikTok shop has been unique in that media figures can directly talk about a product in one of their videos, and link to the product on TikTok shop right within the app. This makes it easier than ever before for consumers to purchase the item directly from the page of someone they follow on TikTok. Therefore, parasocial relationships with media figures across different media platforms can play a role in purchasing decisions, which is why it is something that brands need to consider when choosing their advertising tactics.

Limitations & Future Research

One limitation involving this study would be the survey sample itself. While there were more diverse responses than anticipated, the overall makeup still skewed toward cisgender white women. This show was originally geared toward young children, dancers, and their parents. The show also reached male audiences as there were a few male dancers featured on the show. Therefore, it is unlikely that this survey sample is representative of all *Dance Moms* fans and the relationships that viewers have with the cast members.

Another limitation of this study would include some of the scales used to measure parasocial relationships and interactions. The EPSI (2011) was created in the context of TV performers specifically. Thus, individuals asked to answer Likert-based criteria after watching a short clip or piece of media. This is not applicable to this study as the content was more so based on feelings that individuals had with a particular show or cast members over time. Participants did not see a specific piece of media beforehand. While

this scale has high face validity, it is also important to note the shortcomings this scale provides a study within terms of measurement variables. The criteria in the EPSI results seem to indicate that both measures are tapping into the same things in terms of parasocial relationships and parasocial interactions. However, these measures are supposed to be different, as stated in previous literature (Reynolds, 2022). Developing some new surveys that explicitly separate these concepts for validity would be a positive direction for future research.

An unexpected limitation of this study was that we did not identify favorite cast members from the show. Instead, we asked participants to identify who they had the strongest relationship with. Asking both questions could yield different results than those found from this study. It's possible that participants only engage with content in relation to their favorite character. However, it cannot be supported that participants do not engage with content from those cast members that they did not deem a favorite on the show.

Conclusion

In review, this thesis aimed to find a connection between the strength of an individual's parasocial relationship and interaction with a media figure across multiple platforms. After collecting 180 responses in an online survey, I found that the more media channels an audience member followed the media figure on, the stronger their parasocial relationship and interaction with said media figure. Participants were able to easily identify their favorite cast members from *Dance Moms* based on a few different criteria. This included single-item perceived relationship strength and scores on measures using the Experience of Parasocial Interaction Scale and the Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale. Both scales used in this survey were found to be reliable.

One of the more interesting results from this study showed that 83% of our participants reported seeing *Dance Moms* content on their "For You" pages across social media. This felt very significant to the importance of this study as seeing the content on my own "For

You” page is what inspired me to research this topic. The longer that an individual has followed the cast members or the tv show account on social media, the stronger the relationship they identify as having with them, with only one exception, Kendall on X. Given the amount of time that has gone by since the show first began airing in 2011, this can be interpreted as a significant parasocial relationship in one’s life.

This thesis has added support to parasocial research being an important area of discussion in the communication discourse today, especially as it pertains to social media. Participants, while not always identifying as having a “relationship” with the cast members, shared their unique experiences interacting with the cast and returning to watch the show that they once loved. As future parasocial research is done, it is important to consider social media sites and including the media figures themselves to gather a complete picture of said relationship. Although the show has not been running on the air for more than five years, its popular culture significance remains ingrained in the minds of those who watched the show and discovered the content on social media. While the original cast of the show resonated with audiences, Abby Lee continues to branch out to different projects outside of *Dance Moms* because, after all, “everyone’s replaceable!”

Appendix A: Measures

Table 1 Experience of Parasocial Interactions Scale

While watching the clip, I had the feeling that [name]....

1. was aware of me.
2. knew I was there.
3. knew I was aware of him/her.
4. knew I paid attention to him/her.
5. knew that I reacted to him/her.
6. reacted to what I said or did.

Table 2 Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interactions Scale

Based on a 1-5 scale, please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the next statements, where:

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

1. [celebrity or persona] makes me feel as if I am with someone I know well.
2. If [celebrity or persona] appeared on a TV program, I would watch that program.
3. I see [celebrity or persona] as a natural down-to-earth person.

4. If I saw a newspaper or magazine story about [celebrity or persona], I would read it.
 5. I would like to meet [celebrity or persona] in person.
 6. I feel that I understand the emotions [celebrity or persona] experiences.
 7. I find myself thinking about [celebrity or persona] on a regular basis.
 8. I do not have any feelings about [celebrity or persona].
 9. I like to watch [celebrity or persona] on television.
 10. Whenever I am unable to get news about [celebrity or persona], I really miss it.
 11. Learning about [celebrity or persona] is important to me.
 12. I have been seeking out information in the media to learn more [celebrity or persona].
 13. I sometimes go to the Internet to obtain more information about [celebrity or persona].
 14. Sometimes I feel like calling or writing [celebrity or persona].
 15. [Celebrity or persona] understands the kinds of things I want to know.
 16. I sometimes make remarks to [celebrity or persona] while watching television.
 17. I am very much aware of the details of [celebrity or persona]'s life.
 18. I feel like I have very little understanding of [celebrity or persona] as a person.
 19. I look forward to seeing [celebrity or persona] on television or in the print media.
 20. I am not really interested in [celebrity or persona].
-

Appendix B: Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 Number of Media Channels

Character	1 channel	2 channels	3 channels	4 channels	≥ 1 channel	None	Total
Maddie	33 (18%)	29 (16%)	6 (3%)	3 (2%)	71 (40%)	109 (61%)	180
Mackenzie	31 (17%)	22 (12%)	7 (4%)	3 (2%)	63 (35%)	117 (65%)	180
Nia	33 (18%)	16 (9%)	4 (2%)	2 (1%)	55 (31%)	125 (69%)	180
Chloe	32 (18%)	30 (17%)	5 (3%)	3 (2%)	70 (39%)	110 (61%)	180
Kendall	27 (15%)	12 (7%)	2 (1%)	3 (2%)	44 (24%)	136 (76%)	180
Brooke	27 (15%)	30 (17%)	4 (2%)	2 (1%)	63 (35%)	117 (65%)	180
Paige	24 (13%)	25 (14%)	2 (1%)	3 (2%)	54 (30%)	126 (70%)	180

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