

Twitter's Role in the Disclosure of Parasocial Relationships

Brandon M. Vonderohe

Faculty Sponsor: Ronda Leahy, Communication Studies

ABSTRACT

Parasocial relationships are a relevant connection for any casual television viewer. The following study took an in depth look at the disclosure of such relationships via Twitter. A quantitative content analysis was conducted over an eight week period examining viewer tweets from the popular television shows *The Walking Dead*, *Better Call Saul*, and *Vikings*. The study used an original codebook developed by the researcher that contained seven distinct categories of parasocial relationship types and one slot for examining the frequency of social experience engagements by the viewers of these television shows. It was found that romance and physical attraction played large roles in why viewers were engaged or attracted to certain characters. The data collected remained rather consistent, but it was also found that relationship types varied depending on the content of the episode and progression of storylines of certain characters within each show. A large quantity of social experiences were examined which in return opened up a new way of looking at parasocial relationships. Twitter and dual screen media viewing have now allowed research on parasocial relationships to turn down a path that has never been traveled before due to the increase in availability of technology.

INTRODUCTION

Media provide the opportunity for its users to connect with their interests. Those interests can vary from certain television shows, certain websites, and even certain people. At the forefront of media consumption is television. In fact Lundy, Ruth, and Park (2008) found that TV consumers watch anywhere from three to thirty hours of TV per week with a whopping average of eleven and a half hours. That may not seem like a lot but by examining the run time of an average television program, that could be eleven different shows or up to twenty-two half-hour programs. This large consumption of television leads some people to develop relationships with their favorite programs, and more specifically, the characters within the show. This phenomenon is known as a parasocial relationship, in which television viewers are looking to seek out social relationships with characters they have not met or may not ever meet (Sandvoss, 2005). Due to this phenomenon, television provides a gold mine for viewer research as Russel, Norman, and Heckler (2004) point out, "the consumption of television programming is of particular interest to consumer researchers because of the potential influence of television characters as referent others" (p. 150).

Television is not the only juggernaut in media consumption. With the increase in technology, watching television has changed over the years. Cameron and Geidner (2014) state that television consumption is now defined by viewers using a second screen to participate in multimedia engagement. The most relevant culprit of this second screen consumption next to television is Twitter. With the amount of users numbering 974 million people (Sherman, 2014), Twitter is a perfect communication channel for fans to interact with their favorite TV shows, characters, and communities that also follow the show. A perfect example of this would be the Sheldon Cooper Twitter account from *The Big Bang Theory*, which has 205,000 followers (Bellwoar, 2013). For a lot of fans out there, Twitter is the closest they can get to their favorite characters. Dedicated fans look for opportunities to engage in parasocial relationships with their favorite characters. Twitter is able to monopolize on that feeling of connection (Thompson, 2008) and make it even stronger through the growing method of second screen television consumption.

The purpose of this study is to examine fans' tweets about popular television shows in order to explore the presence and types of parasocial relationships. The three shows being used for the study are *The Walking Dead*, *Better Call Saul*, and *Vikings*. These shows were selected based off of popularity and character development in attempt for the best possible data collection. TV viewers may be familiar with *Better Call Saul* as it is the prequel to the all famous series *Breaking Bad* by AMC. *The Walking Dead* is practically a household name for cable owners especially after its record shattering viewership that numbered over 22 million viewers claiming the highest rated show in television history breaking the 2007 Disney hit movie *High School Musical 2* tally of

17.2 million (St. John, 2014). Not quite as popular, but rather up and coming is the History Channel's series, *Vikings*. The show is entering its fourth season and tallied 4.6 million viewers in its season three premiere ranking it as the number one show on cable in Live +3 (Baron, 2015). Live +3 is a rating system used by networks that air their show live each week and also record DVR play back ratings for three days after, and the *Vikings* are at the forefront of this rating system.

All avid media consumers have the potential to experience parasocial relationships. It is a simple way for viewers to be pulled into shows and a great way for producers and film companies to make their mark and draw in an audience. Twitter provides a communicative channel for consumers and a chance for them to interact with their favorite characters. This not only benefits consumers but it also benefits actors, producers, directors, and even marketing personal within the TV industry. Twitter is essentially a social gathering for media consumers as well as feedback jackpot for the TV industry. With the modern availability of second screen media consumption, this study will take a look at the relationship between Twitter and parasocial relationships in a way that past research did not. By examining modern popular television shows and the parasocial relationship opportunities they create through Twitter, the current study can gain a better understanding for the importance of parasocial relationships and consumer communication. This paper will present the previous research done on parasocial relationships and Twitter as well as Parasocial Relationships Theory to gain a better understanding of the importance of fan and character communication through Twitter. The paper will go on to examine the research the current study completed through a quantitative content analysis and finally explain the implications from the current study's results.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The next portion of this paper will take a look at the growing popularity of Twitter and previous research behind it, and specifically its role as a communication channel for anyone with access. The next section will also take an in depth look on parasocial relationships, the types of parasocial relationships being used for this study, and past research done on these fictional relationships. This will provide a better understanding of why the current study is relevant. This portion of the paper will also feature parasocial relationships theory and how scholars have used it in their previous research. Through this theory, character development will be shown to be quite effective in the success and popularity of shows within the television industry.

Twitter

One of the most popular media tools used for expression on the web is Twitter. This website allows users to broadcast their thoughts and opinions in one hundred forty characters or less to their friends, followers, and the Twitter community in general. With the simple use of the (#) symbol before a word or phrase, Twitter has the ability to link that word or phrase into searchable content across the Twitter community (Bellwoar, 2013). A simple hashtag can connect one viewer watching something on television to an entire community watching the same thing. This is an increasing phenomenon that Cameron and Geidner (2014) call second screen viewing. Second screen viewing allows viewers to watch their favorite shows and then engage in conversation with the people who have the same kind of interests. Twitter has proven to be a popular second screen with television viewers due to its hashtag linkage to main words or phrases that may be popular amongst television viewing. Cameron and Geidner (2014) argue that "television production companies seek to capitalize on these new media usage patterns by integrating real-time opinions of the viewing public into television shows" (p. 401). From watching football on Sundays to watching popular television series during the week, a hashtag is more than likely going to appear at some point whether it is on the field or in the corner of the TV screen. With TV crews taking advantage of the popularity of Twitter, the emphasis of successful television is highly sought after, thus making successful character development just as important to draw in a large viewing audience and community.

Twitter does remain a point of interest for many mass communication and media scholars. Studies done by Segado-Boj, Grandio, and Fernandez-Gomez (2015) and Cameron and Geidner (2014) examine the central role of social media, and specifically Twitter, as the main tool for second-screen viewing. Segado-Boj et al. (2015) focused on the relationships between social media and consumption while using reality TV and its viewers as their focus audience. In a similar study Cameron and Geidner (2014) were focused on the created experiences that second screen viewing provided as well as the particular uses for second screen viewing that included examples such as posting comments, fact checking, or even searching for additional information about the program being watched. Again, the focus audience was revolved around reality TV like primetime newscasts, dating shows, and even Superbowl XLVI. Another study by Larsson (2013) explored the possibilities of

Twitter and the linkage of audiences to current events. The focus audience was that of reality TV programming in the form of a late night talk show. The study used second screen viewing on Twitter to examine communication channels between audience and broadcaster. The current study will focus on further research regarding Twitter as a communication channel and as an effectively popular tool used for second screen viewing. Unlike previous research, the current study will avoid reality TV and focus on popular fictional television programming. Instead of audience to broadcaster relationships, consumption levels, or primary uses of second screen viewing, the current study looks to further explore relationships developed between audience and fictional character through the means of second screen viewing via Twitter.

Instead of focusing on reality TV, consumption levels, and primary uses for second screen viewing, the current study will look at the new opportunities that Twitter provides for television viewers and their parasocial relationships. There has been growing research on Twitter and other social media; however, when looking at pairing parasocial relationships and Twitter the research is unknown. Second screen viewing is just becoming a popular television viewing experience which allows a constantly active communication channel for TV consumers to engage in such activities like posting comments online, viewing what other people post, and live chatting about shows during their air times. Given that all of these interaction opportunities are available via Twitter, the current study will look at the extent of modern parasocial relationships. With scholars such as Horton and Wohl (1956), Horton and Strauss (1957), and Stever (2009) referring to parasocial relationships as “imaginary interactions” between viewer and performer, the current study looks at the potential for viewers to experience a social experience with their parasocial relationships.

Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships theory. Horton and Wohl (1956) originally introduced the idea of parasocial relationships as an interaction or face-to-face relationship between a spectator and a performer. Horton and Wohl (1956) suggested that developing a parasocial relationship is similar to how one chooses their friends; “through direct observation and interpretation of his appearance, his gestures and voice, his conversation and conduct in a variety of situations” (p. 216). Horton and Strauss (1957) argued that parasocial relationships are experienced by the viewer and are immediate and personal but not shared mutually by the performer. More recent studies sway from the idea of parasocial relationships as an immediate development. Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011) and Rubin and McHugh (1987) take the approach that parasocial relationships are a long-term identification between media performer and spectator.

With previous research on parasocial relationships done by Stever (2009), Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011), and Cameron and Geidner (2014) using Uses and Gratifications theory to help guide their research, parasocial relationships theory remains rather untouched when comparing parasocial relationships with social media. The theory focuses specifically on media audiences being drawn in by media personae in an interpersonal interaction that involves empathy, sociability, and agreeability despite this relationship being essentially unidirectional and unreal (Tindi, 2015). This theory will assist in understanding the context involved in a one sided relationship between television viewers and fictional media characters which points in a different direction than previous research interested in why television viewers select their media.

Parasocial relationships theory accounts for a variety of different reasons for audiences to be drawn to their favorite characters. The current study will gain a better understanding of the variety of reasons revealed on Twitter by second screen viewers. The theory will help the current study in understanding the importance of these social relationships and the camaraderie that the television viewing community provides through the access of Twitter in areas such media production, marketing communication, and even entertainment education. Parasocial relationships theory provides a variety of different attractions that viewers can develop towards the affection of their favorite characters and with the help of Twitter, the current study can get an upfront look at categorizing and uncovering the different influential factors that make parasocial relationships so relevant in fictional television.

Parasocial relationships theory offers a focus on the illusionary experience that a viewer has while being engaged within a relationship with a media character. A few factors mentioned by Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) play significant roles in the development and maintenance of parasocial relationships. The few mentioned in their research are performers’ addressing styles, perceived attractiveness to the character by the viewer, and the viewer’s ability to adopt the perspective of certain characters as an opportunity for engaging in parasocial relationships with those characters. Given that each individual is different, the time frame of development may differ from viewer to viewer when developing a parasocial relationship. A concept that Tindi (2015) mentions regarding parasocial relationships theory is that parasocial interaction may intensify with every viewing experience, but there are differences in how each individual may experience the parasocial interaction.

These concepts provide great interest to the current study as it will be examining popular television shows and their viewing communities via Twitter. The current study will use parasocial relationships theory as a guide for examining the different types of parasocial relationships that viewers reveal on Twitter as well as how parasocial relationships on Twitter may be different due to the available interaction opportunities that Twitter provides for viewers.

Research on parasocial relationships. The thought of choosing TV characters to relate to in the same way a person chooses their friend groups stresses the impact and importance that successful character development can have. In a previous study done by Eyal and Rubin (2003) it was noted that research is pointed toward exploring people's perceptions of the characters they like and compare it to the type of programing they watch. Not only does this type of relationship provide a sense of companionship and camaraderie, it also draws in significant audience for television networks and developers. As Rubin and McHugh (1987) point out "if the viewer accepts the relationship, he or she will most likely watch the program again, and if the viewing continues, a parasocial relationship becomes ongoing" (p. 280). The current study will focus on the viewer audience and observe the disclosure of parasocial relationships on Twitter. Previous research provides talking points from the amount of time it takes to develop a parasocial relationship (Horton & Strauss, 1957), to the indications of successful character development that potentially draws and keeps an audience committed to certain television programs (Stever, 2009). The current study will use these points of research and examine them through a more modernized communication route in Twitter, which has not been done before.

With a good understanding of the parasocial interaction involved with these one-sided relationships, Horton and Wohl (1956) then focused on the intimacy factor as parasocial relationships could have been an alternative interpersonal relationship for some people. Progressing into the future, research on the topic has broadened. What started out as a topic within mass communication, spread to the fields of psychology and sociology. Scholars such as Stever (2009), Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011), and Cohen (2004) were primarily interested in how parasocial relationships affected TV consumers and parasocial breakups when their favorite characters were taken off air due to external reasons. Stever (2009) pointed out that "people use media relationships to relieve boredom, fight loneliness, or give focus and direction to their lives" (p. 5), indicating the interest in how people choose their media and characters. Horton and Strauss (1957) looked at interactions within television shows that involved audience participation. Through the research done by Horton and Strauss (1957) parasocial relationships set the stage for focusing research involved with interactions between viewer and performer. The current study would be aimed towards the development process of parasocial relationships and the types of these relationships that are disclosed by the people involved rather than focusing on the aftermath of the relationship after it has concluded. Twitter provides a constant source of updates and easy search mechanisms that allow a researcher to monitor such experiences that simply could not have been accomplished in previous research due to the lacking of such advanced technology.

Types of Parasocial Relationships

An important aspect that the current study looked to address was looking at the different kinds of parasocial relationships that could be found on Twitter by avid television viewers. The study used a framework of past research from Stever (2009) and Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) to build a foundation of different types of parasocial relationships to look for. Although past research was taken into consideration, the current study used the previous research and enhanced it to develop eight original categories of parasocial relationships to be used for research.

Romantic and Physical Attraction. The first type of parasocial relationship is the romantic relationship. In this relationship the viewer expresses and roots for the desire to be involved romantically with a certain television character. This process allows parasocial attraction to follow a similar process a person would use in an actual interpersonal attraction in ways such as shared values, attitudes, and similar backgrounds to the desired character (Cialdini, 1993). The viewer may also applaud and root for a current romantic relationship involving their favorite character. Advancing past romance, a viewer may also express their approval of physical attraction to a certain character regarding their appearance and body features that they would desire in a real life relationship. The romantic and physical attraction parasocial relationship is essentially "a substitute for lack of social interaction in real life and to prevent oneself from feeling lonely" (Cohen, 1997, p. 516).

Heroic and Idolization. The heroic relationship comes in the form of a character seen as a hero or role model by the viewer. The viewer sees this relationship as someone they can look up to and idolize based off of the personality that specific character plays or something they did in a television show to take on this quality. The viewer looks at this character as someone who possesses bravery, skill, dominance, or leadership as

someone look up to and look toward in any conflict or problem solving issue that may arrive within their selected TV show. This role can usually be found within a main character of every show and is easily likeable for the common TV viewer.

Family Oriented. The family oriented parasocial relationship is set to focus on a viewer relating a certain character as a possible member of their own family. This can occur when the viewer views a character as someone with the same qualities they see in their own family. This may be the case if a viewer sees a character as a parent figure or possibly express their desire to bond with younger characters such as children or babies and wish they were their own. The viewer can show signs of this relationship by expressing their own family values and closeness in association with one of the characters in the selected TV show.

Friendship and Companionship. When it comes to the friendship and companionship parasocial relationship type, a viewer would seek out a character in which a friendship would be desired in the same way that person would choose a friend in their own life. The process in doing this is so similar that Eyal and Dailey (2012) used a model that was able to predict commitment levels in parasocial relationships that closely resembled commitment levels of interpersonal relationships. With physical appearance and attractiveness left out of the equation, a friendship parasocial relationship is formed when a character possesses the same qualities that a certain viewer seeks for in a friendship. Although this is a one sided relationship, the viewer may express their interest to spend time with the character or simply approve their personality styles to their own liking. The viewer is likely to express their interests in comradery, understanding, or association with that certain character while talking about them.

Enemy and Villain. This relationship revolves around the dislike and hatred of certain characters. In this case the viewer expresses emotional dislike towards certain characters due to their personality that they may disagree with or even an act that they performed that made the viewer express their disapproval. At the opposing spectrum, there are also those who embrace evil and cruelty. The same type of relationship can be said for those who enjoy the villain or the enemy in popular television show. The viewer embraces their personality and manipulative character roles that they may express support just the same as if some viewers expressed their dislike towards the same person. For the current study, the enemy and villain parasocial relationship was used as a dual sided relationship, depending on each viewer's interpretation of selected characters.

Sympathetic and Remorseful. The sympathetic and remorseful parasocial relationship occurs when the viewer feels deeply affected by something that happened to a certain character of a TV show. This study looks at the expression of tweets that viewers disclose on Twitter in which they expressed sympathy or sadness towards a certain character due to the situation they were put in. The viewer may not necessarily like or dislike the character but is involved emotionally with the character due to how the producers of the show chose to develop that character and everything that happens to that character.

Actor. The parasocial relationship between viewer and actor is strictly performance based. This relationship is also usually one sided and based on the track record of an actor or actress that is currently playing a part in the show the viewer is engaged with. Stever (2009) used a performance based category when conducting her research. Similar to the Stever (2009) study this relationship exists only when a viewer expresses their affection with the actor and not the character they play. Twitter provides a playground for celebrities and fans, thus making engaging in actor related parasocial relationships fairly easy to a dual viewing media viewer.

Engaging in Social Experiences. An additional category was added to the current study based on the opportunities that Twitter provides its users to link with the media personalities and other fans. By doing so Twitter users are able to communicate their parasocial relationships and reactions to each episode to media personal and the fans of each show. Baek et al. (2013) describes engaging in parasocial relationships as a one sided instance in which the viewer knows everything going on with their favorite celebrities but not vice versa. The social experience happens when the viewer engages with their friends on the same topic. Similar to that idea, the study will monitor the social experience as instances when viewers engage with each other or media personal during or after the show's airing. If the viewer is making an effort towards their favorite character, it then becomes a social experience in addition to the parasocial relationship they are already engaged in.

With the availability of actors, viewers, and media outlets on Twitter, the viewer can now engage in communication with that same personal before, during, and after their favorite TV shows air. This would no longer be considered an imaginary experience but rather a social experience for the viewer. Due to the availability of enhanced technology that allow these opportunities to occur, the current study looks to bridge the gap from previous research referring to parasocial relationships as imaginary experiences to the modern age of parasocial relationships becoming social experiences for viewers.

HYPOTHESES

Previous research involving parasocial relationships was primarily focused on the affection and consumption levels that engaged viewers during their social relationships. The increase in technology and specifically Twitter has led to the new way of television consumption in second screen viewing. This study will address the rise in popularity of second screen viewing and link it together with influential factors that provide a variety of different types of parasocial relationships. As Stever (2009) and Cameron and Geidner (2014) point out, there are a variety of factors leading to different types of relationships for the viewing audiences based on their preferences. With the simple access to second screen viewing and the entertainment of quality television, the first hypotheses stands as:

H1: The types of parasocial relationships revealed on Twitter after primetime television episodes are directly based on the content of the specific episode.

The second screen viewing method of TV consumption provides opportunities for discussion and fandom. With the use of the hashtag and trending topics, Twitter is able to link communities together like never before. Previous research by Horton and Wohl (1956), Horton and Strauss (1957), and Stever (2009) phrase parasocial relationships as imaginary experiences had between viewer and performer. The current study will address these created opportunities and their availability to impact parasocial relationships that go from imaginary experiences to social experiences in search of the second hypotheses

H2: Social experiences will be initiated on Twitter with characters of *The Walking Dead*, *Vikings*, and *Better Call Saul*.

RESEARCH METHOD

Method Description

The current study used the post-positivist research paradigm. A content analysis method was used to examine what types of parasocial relationships were revealed via Twitter by the viewers of *The Walking Dead*, *Better Call Saul*, and *Vikings*. In addition to examining the presence and types of parasocial relationships on Twitter, a content analysis was used to examine the extent of a parasocial relationship from being an imaginary relationship to a legitimate social experience. The post-positivist paradigm was best suited for the study because the researcher is to remain objective. The post-positivist paradigm is based on the assumption that patterns will be found within the research (Keyton, 2011). The purpose of the current study was to examine tweets for the types of parasocial relationships. The role of the researcher was to be objective for this content analysis as Esterberg (2002) states that “a content analysis generally involves a systematic analysis of texts” (p. 171). Given that Twitter is primarily text based, a content analysis appeared to be most applicable for finding common themes and patterns amongst television viewers and their parasocial relationships.

Sample

The content analysis used tweets from Twitter using the hashtag followed by each show title during an eight week span of episodes. The tweets that were used were required to relate to characters or actors within each show. A tweet could not be used for the study if it did not contain any relation to any character or actor of the given show. The study focused on the content of each tweet and looked at the different potential different reasons people disclosed for being drawn towards the character. Tweets that contained an account of a character or actress in attempt to communicate with them were monitored for the engagement of a social experience. If a fan is making an attempt to communicate with a character the experience is no longer considered parasocial but rather a social experience due to the fact that this would eliminate the imaginary attempt to initiate a relationship. All tweets were coded by using a custom code book created by the researcher for the purpose of the study.

Measurement

Tweets from viewers were analyzed and categorized into specific parasocial relationship categories created by the researcher. The tweets were then tallied each week and totaled up to a numerical value. The popularity of each category was measured based off of how high the numbers of tweets were each week relating to that specific category. Spikes in the number of tweets in any form were a point of interest for the current study. Frequencies were the priority of measurement for the duration of the study.

Procedure

The first step of the procedure involved the researcher preparing a code book to be used for the study (see Appendix) The codebook was based on previous parasocial relationship types used in Stever (2009) and Cameron and Geidner (2014). With the variety of possible parasocial relationship types provided, the researcher then formed an original codebook from scratch that contained the seven relationship types listed previously and a portion that allowed for the monitoring of social experience engagements. The objective in mind when coding the tweets was to determine the quantity of relationship types discovered while live searching the hashtag of each of the three shows after their air date. *The Walking Dead* aired on Sunday nights and the tweets from its fans were monitored from a Sunday to Wednesday time period each week. *Better Call Saul* aired on Mondays and the tweets from its fans were monitored from a Monday to Thursday time period. Finally, *Vikings* aired on Thursdays each week and the tweets from its fans were monitored from a Thursday to Sunday time period each week. The amount of tweets collected from each show ranged from a minimum of twenty-five per week and a maximum of fifty per week. The number was determined on how popular the tweets for each individual show were regarding the discussion of characters and character development during each episode amongst their loyal communities on Twitter. Tweets could be counted as referencing one or more parasocial relationship type. Once the tweets were collected during their desired time period, they were pasted into a document so the researcher had access to a physical copy. The tweets were labeled with the episode number they related to. To avoid biasness in the study, the researcher only used one tweet per user each week. Each parasocial relationship type was assigned a number that ranged from one to eight. The tweets were then coded with a numerical value and the data was entered into the codebook. Tweets were discarded that belonged to sponsored Twitter accounts or any account that was involved with the specific shows.

Data Analysis

This is a quantitative content analysis and the study is analyzed by the frequency of parasocial relationships examined during the eight week time period of the three shows. The tweets were coded based on the perception of the content of the researcher and the codebook created for the study. The data were analyzed based off of any themes or consistencies of the number of tweets collected. The data collected varied each week but the researcher looked for an amount of character related tweets that numbered anywhere from twenty five, the minimum, to fifty, the maximum. For viewing purposes, the data collected during the eight weeks of research has been converted into three tables. Each table represents one of the three shows that were studied over the course of the semester. The results and tables are listed below, each on its own separate page.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, the most popular parasocial relationship type was the Romantic and Physical Appearance type. The second most populated relationship type was the Enemy and Villain category. As a show packed with action, *The Walking Dead* also had a few spurts where the heroic and role model relationship type numbered double or triple its average on a few occasions.

Table 1: The Walking Dead

| TYPE OF RELATIONSHIP | S6:E9 | S6:E10 | S6:E11 | S6:E12 | S6:E13 | S6:E14 | S6:E15 | S6:E16 | TOTAL |
|------------------------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| ROMANTIC AND PHYSICAL | 5 | 15 | 17 | 12 | 9 | 6 | 12 | 11 | 87 |
| HEROIC AND ROLE MODEL | 7 | 6 | 5 | 10 | 16 | 6 | 6 | 4 | 60 |
| FAMILY | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| FRIEND/COMPANION | 3 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 7 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 28 |
| ENEMY/VILLAIN | 10 | 8 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 19 | 19 | 72 |
| SYMPATHETIC/REMORSE | 2 | 1 | 0 | 7 | 4 | 11 | 9 | 4 | 38 |
| ACTOR | 1 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 7 | 7 | 10 | 13 | 55 |
| SOCIAL EXPERIENCE | 8 | 8 | 4 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 56 |
| TOTAL | 37 | 50 | 42 | 48 | 52 | 42 | 66 | 63 | 400 |

As shown in Table 2, *Better Call Saul* impacted viewers with parasocial relationships through Role Model type character development and the strong passion for parasocial relationships as well as the actors who make up the cast, which recorded the highest number of parasocial relationship instances amongst the seven categories. *Better Call Saul* also recorded the most social experiences on Twitter during the eight week run among the three different shows. Another category that was high in numbers was the Enemy and Villain parasocial relationship category, which also remained quite inconsistent throughout the eight weeks.

Table 2: Better Call Saul

| TYPE OF RELATIONSHIP | S2:E1 | S2:E2 | S2:E3 | S2:E4 | S2:E5 | S2:E6 | S2:E7 | S2:E8 | TOTAL |
|------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| ROMANTIC AND PHYSICAL | 6 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 12 | 6 | 37 |
| HEROIC AND ROLE MODEL | 4 | 9 | 6 | 16 | 9 | 15 | 6 | 4 | 69 |
| FAMILY | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| FRIEND/COMPANION | 2 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 22 |
| ENEMY/VILLIAN | 3 | 10 | 9 | 3 | 11 | 5 | 3 | 18 | 62 |
| SYMPATHETIC/REMORSE | 1 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 27 |
| ACTOR | 3 | 8 | 12 | 6 | 9 | 8 | 17 | 9 | 72 |
| SOCIAL EXPERIENCE | 11 | 7 | 9 | 7 | 9 | 10 | 16 | 10 | 79 |
| TOTAL | 30 | 46 | 46 | 37 | 48 | 46 | 64 | 53 | 370 |

Out of the three shows the highest total in any category was credited to the romantic and physical parasocial relationship following in the show *Vikings* as shown here in Table 3. The runner up category was the heroic and role model relationship type. Social experiences tallied more than *The Walking Dead* but less than *Better Call Saul*. Finally, a total of four hundred eight parasocial relationship ques were recorded during the eight weeks of *Vikings* episodes, which puts it as the most among the three shows that were studied.

Table 3: Vikings

| TYPE OF RELATIONSHIP | S4:E1 | S4:E2 | S4:E3 | S4:4 | S4:E5 | S4:E6 | S4:E7 | S4:E8 | TOTAL |
|-----------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| ROMANTIC AND PHYSICAL | 12 | 13 | 17 | 14 | 9 | 19 | 14 | 11 | 109 |
| HEROIC AND ROLE MODEL | 6 | 9 | 5 | 10 | 19 | 3 | 7 | 5 | 64 |
| FAMILY | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 7 |
| FRIEND/COMPANION | 1 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 7 | 14 |
| ENEMY/VILLAIN | 8 | 11 | 6 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 9 | 13 | 60 |
| SYMPATHETIC/REMORSE | 2 | 7 | 8 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 9 | 4 | 37 |
| ACTOR | 3 | 8 | 6 | 6 | 11 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 48 |
| SOCIAL EXPERIENCE | 12 | 7 | 12 | 8 | 12 | 7 | 5 | 6 | 69 |
| TOTAL | 44 | 55 | 57 | 44 | 59 | 47 | 51 | 51 | 408 |

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine fans' tweets about popular television shows in order to explore the presence and types of parasocial relationships. Although the researcher crafted and developed an original slate of parasocial relationships to examine, the presence of such relationships were rather significant for the current study. One of the more standout numbers of data results happened to be the romantic and physical attraction relationship type. When looking at the three shows that were studied, the genres run mainly as one drama and two action/adventure television shows. Going off of that point even further, *The Walking Dead* is a show about survival in a zombie apocalypse, *Better Call Saul* is a drama about the struggles of a low life lawyer on a path towards corruption, and finally this season of *Vikings* was about exterminating, conquering, and aiming war towards innocent European countries. From a glance, not one of these shows would stand out to be focused on parasocial relationships brought on by romance and physical attraction. The results from the previous tables clearly show that the viewership of these three shows were quite fascinated with romance and physical attraction, disregarding any plot schemes or genres. The leader of this statistic was *Vikings*. In a show based on killing and conquering, one may ask why romantic and physical attraction parasocial relationships make up twenty-five percent of the recorded statistics. Upon, analyzing tweets and staying up to speed on each show each week, the researcher observed that many tweets were directed at three of the primary characters played by Katheryn Winnick, Travis Fimmel, and Clive Standen. Together, the three of these actors drew most of the attention when it came to romance. The sixth, seventh, and eighth episodes of the fourth season of *Vikings* revisited a flame of romance between Fimmel and Winnick's characters from earlier in the show. There was a constant flow of tweets in favor of the romance between the two characters. Many of the tweets related to this story line but for an example Suellen Albuquerque (@xuxupanda29) tweeted "I wanna see Ragnar and Lagertha together again #Vikings @HistoryVikings." Although the show is based around the conquering and slaughter of European villages, romance and love still found its way to the forefront in ways such as this, which lead to Table 3 showing a slight spike in numbers of romantic and physical attraction during these episodes.

Similar to *Vikings*, *The Walking Dead* is also an action packed show about survival that had a surprising amount of tweets regarding romance and physical attraction. The brunt force of this obsession came in episodes ten and eleven of the season when the main protagonist Rick Grimes became engaged in a serious relationship

with another fan favorite, Michonne. The two episodes that revealed this storyline, also recorded the highest amounts of romantic and physical attraction type parasocial relationships.

Sticking with the theme of data numbers randomly spiking, Table 1 and Table 2 take dramatic leaps in the Enemy and Villain category. The spike in Table 1 may have something to do with the fact that those particular episodes were the last two episodes for *The Walking Dead* this season. *The Walking Dead* is notoriously known to “break the internet” with their season finales. Nearly every season they rile up their fans on Twitter with some story line or plot scheme that causes hatred amongst a large population of its viewers. However, the same cannot be said for the spike in Table 2 in the Enemy and Villain category of episode eight. *Better Call Saul* runs thirteen episodes per season and is just over halfway through its second season at the time of the current study. With a minimal history with season finales and the fact that the show was halfway through the season, it is not quite predictable enough for its dedicated fans to know exactly what might happen to end a season like *The Walking Dead*. Relating to the current study, the first hypothesis predicted that the types of parasocial relationships found on Twitter would be directly related to the content of certain episodes. In this instance hypothesis one was supported. The spike in data in Table 2 as well as the spike in romantic tweets during the Rick and Michonne saga earlier in the season point towards the statement that viewers will directly relate their feelings in their parasocial relationships to the specific content taking place week in and week out involving their favorite characters.

The current study also predicted a second hypothesis; social experiences will be initiated on Twitter with characters of *The Walking Dead*, *Vikings*, and *Better Call Saul*. By examining all three data tables, it is certain that there are no shortages of social experiences among the viewership of these three shows that actively use Twitter. *Better Call Saul* lead the way with seventy-nine separate social experiences amongst its viewers during the current study. *Vikings* came in next with sixty-nine followed by *The Walking Dead* with fifty-six social experiences. *Better Call Saul* has the least amount of time for character development based on the amount of time each show has been on air. In its second season, it remains fascinating that *Better Call Saul* can draw such an audience to take their parasocial relationship experience a step further and taking an initiative into experience an actual social experience with a character, producer, or actor from the making of the show. Through weekly observation, it has been made clear that there may be a driving force behind the amount of social experiences the show has generated. Actress Rhea Seehorn who plays Kim Wexler in the show was shown to be a very active cast member on Twitter. Seehorn was known to interact with her fans on a weekly basis such as instances like this from Twitter user Tabish Yousuf (@TabishYousuf) “@rheaseehorn ♥ just liked my tweets. This just made my day!” Instances such as this may go a long way in drawing in audiences that wish to engage in social experiences. There is a great possibility that the chance of being noticed by a high level celebrity then increases the chances of more viewers to attempt to initiate a social interaction with the actor or performer.

However, according to the data in Table 2 another number may also help reveal why social experiences are so high. The amount of parasocial relationships engaged with actors in *Better Call Saul* numbered seventy-two different tweets, which is pretty close to the seventy-nine social experience engagements. Vince Gilligan, the producer of the show, has been known for his role in brilliant writing in his previous work, *Breaking Bad*. The findings bring upon the thought that there is a possibility the brilliant mind behind these television shows may have a niche for drawing viewers towards his characters. The fact that *Better Call Saul* is a prequel to the famous *Breaking Bad* series also cannot be ignored. Although *Better Call Saul* is only in its second season, the show contains a wide variety of beloved characters that were featured in the legendary *Breaking Bad* story such as Mike Ehrmantraut, Saul Goodman, and Hector Salamanca to name a few. One could assume that there is a great possibility that the appearance of characters such as these at the forefront of *Better Call Saul* could be a primary reason that the actor and social experience categories are as high as they are and number the most out of the three shows that were studied.

The final point to take away from this study is the pathways it has opened up. Parasocial relationships are not an untouched research topic by any means. However, as technology is evolving there are new methods and opportunities for the communication of parasocial relationships. As shown in this study, Twitter has become a huge point of interest for this particular topic. Television is essentially dissected on Twitter by the people watching. The dual media viewing is a new way of consuming media that has just never been done before. Now that technology allows this to happen, the research on parasocial relationships can cover a whole new angle. Twitter provides opportunities for multiple different people in the media industry. From sorting through thousands upon thousands of fan tweets each week it is evident that there are opinions from all across the world and they are all connected by a simple little hashtag. Not many websites offer such feedback as timely and as organized as Twitter does. When it comes to parasocial relationships and character development

especially, the conversations on Twitter are endless. By using the easy search mechanism that Twitter provides, fans can instantly interact with their favorite actors, producers, shows, and even each other. This instant access allows parasocial relationships to venture into a depth that has never been explored before. Viewers are literally one click away from taking an imaginary relationship with someone they have never personally met before, into the next level of initiating a real relationship through a social experience. As stated before in this study, a parasocial relationship is a one-sided imaginary relationship between a viewer and a performer. With the accessibility and opportunities provided through Twitter, a parasocial relationship is more engaging and dynamic than ever before.

LIMITATIONS

The study went rather smoothly but minimal limitations were encountered. The first limitation was the accessibility of each television show. The accessibility was quite random when it came to watching the television shows. Without cable, the researcher had no choice but to wait until the episodes were loaded online which usually occurred within a twenty-four hour period. If the researcher may have been able to watch every single episode live as they happened, the data collection may have been different based off of the available tweets at that point in time rather than cycling through a small number from the previous night a day later.

The final limitations experienced involved the codebook. Being that the researcher is rather new to this field, the codebook was missing some valuable information that could have helped the process. The codebook only contained a select few examples of parasocial relationship types. Upon viewing hundreds of tweets, there could have been more of a variety of relationship types. For example there were plenty of fans who enjoyed the humor of certain characters, which could have been a legit reason for an engagement into a parasocial relationship. On the contrary, the codebook also contained categories such as family and companionship which ended up being minimally popular and very difficult to monitor. In addition to the categories contained in the codebook, the current study did contain intercoder reliability. Each episode was coded by the researcher and no additional coder was ever involved. The perception of only the researcher was used for the current study regarding the types of parasocial relationships that were recorded week in and week out.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future researchers could use this study as a focal point of examining modern day parasocial relationships through the eyes of second screen media. Parasocial relationships have never been studied in this way before, which now allows multiple doors to be opened for future research. Popular television has a new way to offer viewers a chance to interact and Twitter is a perfect avenue. Among popular television lies the sports industry as well as reality TV. It would be quite interesting to see what kind of relationships are present amongst both of those industries because both of those topics contain real life entertainment rather than following a script that was written for them. Since technology allows us to follow live events in the palm of our hands, it would be a point of interest to examine parasocial relationships through live events.

Another possibility for future research could be based off of the findings of this study, specifically the romantic and physical attraction relationship type statistics. It is quite evident that the media industry, at least its viewers, may be obsessed with sex. A future researcher could explore this area of expertise through the eyes of parasocial relationships theory or even uses and gratifications theory to find out the reasons why people are so involved romantically with certain television characters that star in certain television shows.

This study examined the disclosure of parasocial relationships on Twitter by the viewers of three popular television shows airing on television during this past winter and spring seasons. The objective was to find out what the most popular types of parasocial relationships were disclosed by each show's dedicated viewers. The study found that the number of relationships found each week were directly dependent on the content of each episode and the impact each episode made on each character that different viewers experienced parasocial relationships with. The study also found that there was a heavy dose of social engagement between viewers and cast members of each show. Although the majority of engagements were one sided, the fact that the viewers were still taking their parasocial relationships to the next level remained to be an important point of research. The research angle for parasocial relationships has a new twist. With the access of Twitter, dual media viewing, and increasing available technology, parasocial relationships can be examined like never before.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my adviser Ronda Leahy for her guidance through this process, without her this would not be possible. I would also like to reach out and thank the entire Communication Studies Department at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse for the hands-on opportunities to progress and excel as a better writer.

REFERENCES

- Baek, Y. M., Bae, Y., & Jang, H. (2013). Social and parasocial relationships on social network sites and their differential relationships with users' psychological well-being. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior & Social Networking, 16*(7), 512-517. doi:10.1089/cyber.2012.0510
- Baron, S. (24 February 2015). History's hit drama series 'Vikings' captures 4.6 million total viewers in live +3 delivery. *TV by the Numbers*. Retrieved from <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2015/02/24/history-hit-drama-series-vikings-captures-4-6-million-total-viewers-in-live-3-delivery/>
- Bellwoar, R. M. (2013). Twitter and television. Undergraduate Works, Award-Winners & Notable. Paper 7. Retrieved from http://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=undergrad_works
- Cameron, J., & Geidner, N. (2014). Something old, something new, something borrowed from something blue: Experiments on dual viewing TV and Twitter. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 58*(3), 400-419. doi:10.1080/08838151.2014.935852
- Cialdini, R. B. (1993). *Influence: Science and practice* (3rd ed.). New York: Harper Collins.
- Cohen, J. (2004). Parasocial break-up from favorite television characters: The role of attachment styles and relationship intensity. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 21*, 187-202.
- Cohen, J. (1997). Parasocial relations and romantic attraction: Gender and dating status differences. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 41*(4), 516.
- Esterberg, K. G. (2002). *Qualitative methods in social research*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Eyal, K., & Dailey, R. M. (2012). Examining relational maintenance in parasocial relationships. *Mass Communication & Society, 15*(5), 758-781. doi:10.1080/15205436.2011.616276
- Eyal, K., & Rubin, A. M. (2003). Viewer aggression and homophily, identification, and parasocial relationships with television characters. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 47*(1), 77-98.
- Hartmann, T., & Goldhoorn, C. (2011). Horton and Wohl revisited: Exploring viewers' experience of parasocial interaction. *Journal of Communication, 61*(6), 1104-1121.
- Horton, D., & Strauss, A. (1957). Interaction in audience participation shows. *The American Journal of Sociology, 62*, 579-587.
- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry, 19*, 215-229.
- Keyton, J. (2011). *Communication research: Asking questions, finding answers* (3rd ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Larsson, A. O. (2013). Tweeting the viewer: Use of Twitter in a talk show context. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 57*, 135-152.
- Lather, J., & Moyer-Guse, E. (2011). How do we react when our favorite characters are taken away? An examination of a temporary parasocial breakup. *Mass Communication & Society, 14*(2), 196-215.
- Lundy, L. K., Ruth, A. M., & Park, T. D. (2008). Simply irresistible: Reality TV consumption patterns. *Communication Quarterly, 56*(2), 208-225. doi:10.1080/01463370802026828
- Rubin, R. B., & McHugh, M. P. (1987). Development of parasocial interaction relationships. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 31*(3), 279-292.
- Russell, C. A., Norman, A. T., & Heckler, S. E. (2004). The consumption of television programming: Development and validation of the connectedness scale. *Journal of Consumer Research, 31*(1), 150-161.
- Sandvoss, C. (2005). *Fans: The mirror of consumption*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Segado-Boj, F., Grandío, M., & Fernández-Gómez, E. (2015). Social media and television: A bibliographic review based on the web of science. *El Profesional De La Información, 24*(3), 227-234. doi:10.3145/epi.2015.may.02
- Sherman, E. (2014, April 14). Many Twitter users don't tweet, finds report. *CBS Money Watch*. Retrieved from <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/many-twitter-users-dont-tweet-finds-report/>
- St. John, A. (13 October 2014). The Walking Dead season 5 premiere breaks ratings record as the most watched cable show of all time. *Forbes*. Retrieved from

- <http://www.forbes.com/sites/allenstjohn/2014/10/13/the-walking-dead-season-5-premiere-breaks-ratings-record-as-the-most-watched-cable-show-of-all-time/#56a7d7b872b8>
- Steuer, G. S. (2009). Parasocial and social interaction with celebrities: Classification of media fans. *Journal of Media Psychology*, 14(3), 1-38.
- Thompson, C. (2008, September 7). Brave new world of digital intimacy. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://individual.utoronto.ca/kreemy/proposal/07.pdf>
- Tindi, S. (2015). *Parasocial interaction theory*. [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from <http://www.slideshare.net/StephenTindi/parasocial-interaction-theory-47296786>

APPENDIX

Data Collection: Coding Scheme

Types of Parasocial Relationships

1) Romantic or Physical Attraction

- a. The “tweeter” desires a romantic relationship or displays mentions of physical attraction towards a certain character. The word “love” could be a primary clue of this type but how it is used would be important. If the tweeter uses love as a verb, the Tweet could be too generic for the study (e.g. “I love Rick Grimes.”) If love is used as a noun or a feeling the tweet would fall into this category (e.g. “I am in love with Rick Grimes.”)
- b. For the physical attraction side, a tweeter would express any possible body features, or anything that resembles the physical appearance of the character (Cute, hot, gorgeous, handsome, beautiful, etc.)

2) Heroic

- a. The tweeter sees a certain character as a form of a hero or role model figure. The tweet would have to display affection towards leadership, heroic tasks, protection, modesty, respect, or desire to be similar to a certain character (e.g. “I would vote Rick Grimes for president, what a legend #beast.”)

3) Family Oriented

- a. The tweeter sees a certain character as part of their family. These tweets contain mentions of family titles such as dad, mom, sister etc. The tweet gives off vibes of family values and closeness (e.g. “I can’t believe Beth died in the last episode of the season, she was like a sister to me.”)

4) Friendship/Companionship

- a. The tweeter sees a certain character as a friend or comrade. Expresses the desire to hang out, chill, or any desire that resembles an interpersonal bond without including physical appearance. Tweets will be used that include the interpretations of comradery, understanding, or an association (e.g. “Daryl is the man, I would pay good money to have a beer with him.”)

5) Enemy/Villain

- a. This tweeter is directly aiming violence or hatred towards a certain character within the show. These tweets contain mentions of violence, threats, dislike, hatred, and cruelty in act to direct harm towards the selected character for possibly something they did in the show or maybe even the personality type of the character (e.g. “I wish someone would just kill Joeffry, I hate that kid more than anything else in the world.”)

6) Sympathetic/Remorseful

- a. The Tweeter feels bad for a certain character based on events that have happened or the way the producers chose to develop that certain character.

7) Actor

- a. the tweeter feels a strong connection to an actor/actress that is playing the part of a certain character.

8) Engaging in Social Experiences Via Twitter

- a. This statistic will be measured anytime a tweeter mentions someone in association with the selected show they are watching within their tweet. This can range from the actors account, a producer, the show’s account, a fake character account, or even other fans account that the viewer may be engaged with while talking about the show using the specific hashtag of the show. The mentions are monitored with the @ sign right before the name of the account. A valid account on

Twitter will be hyperlinked so the user can click right on it and will be taken to the official page of that account. Even if this is a one sided conversation, an attempt is made to engage in a social experience with someone of association with a specific show that the viewer is watching.