

## Development and Validation of a Parasocial Interaction Measure: The Audience-Persona Interaction Scale

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*This research attempted to develop a multidimensional measure of parasocial interaction. A 47-item questionnaire derived from qualitative responses was submitted to principal components analysis - resulting in a 22-item, four-factor Audience Persona Interaction (API) Scale. The four sub-scales were: Identification with Favorite character, Interest in Favorite character, Group Identification/Interaction, and Favorite Character's Problem Solving Ability. In the initial analysis, the index and its subscales were found to be very reliable and positively correlated to program exposure level. In an additional construct validity test, mild linear relationships were found between PSI - as measured by the API Scale - and viewing level.*

"Para-social interaction" (PSI) was first operationalized by Horton and Wohl (1956). They defined the apparent face-to-face interaction between media characters (or "personae") and audience members as "para-social" - similar to interpersonal social interaction, but with distinct differences due to the fact that the communication is mediated and the "interaction" is only one-way. Like true social interaction, it has been suggested that parasocial interaction is a multi-dimensional construct. And like true social interaction, PSI is a complex yet important interaction that - if studied carefully - might provide significant insight into the audience - media relationship. Theorists have proposed that a number of factors are involved in the relationship, including identification with a persona, interest

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in a persona and a feeling of group interaction (Horton & Wohl; Nordlund, 1978; Rosengren & Windahl, 1972).

A number of different measures have been developed to quantitatively determine audience parasocial interaction — however some do not stem from qualitative responses or rigorous item analysis, while others measure the complex concept with a scant few statements. Rosengren and Windahl (1972) were the first researchers who attempted to measure PSI. They were dissatisfied with their relatively crude respondent self-categorization system based on collapsing their four-cell “degree of involvement” typology into two categories. The researchers developed a much stronger measure related to PSI a few years later (Rosengren, Windahl, Hakansson, & Johnson-Smaragdi, 1976). Starting with qualitative data, the researchers developed a 10-item “degree of involvement” survey, with three of the items representing a univariate measure of PSI. The authors only found a weak correlation between their three-item PSI measure and TV viewing levels.

Nordlund (1978) developed a set of six indices of “media interaction” constructed to measure respondents’ relationships with characters in serial programming. The first four scales were designed to measure respondents’ “media interaction” in a general manner in relation to four different types of content—serial stories in magazines, television serials, game shows, and entertainment shows in general. Two indices were also developed to determine a respondent’s media interaction with a serial figure and a game show host. Details about development, construction and testing of the scales are not provided although examples are noted at the end of the article along with the range of scale reliabilities (.74 to .97). The actual reliability of each scale or even the number of items in each scale is not made clear, however.

Levy (1979) developed a 4-item PSI survey after qualitative responses were turned into a 7-item measure and administered to 240 subjects. Methods of item reduction and data interpretation are not discussed in the article. Also, Levy’s PSI index has not been subjected to extensive tests of its validity, and its reliability ( $\alpha = .68$ ) is low relative to other PSI measures. Houlberg (1984), on the other hand, provides detailed description of how items for his scale were developed from qualitative data, administered to 258 respondents, and then factor analyzed. His 5-item PSI measure accounted for 26.7% of the total variance in his sample. However, he found no correlation between it and TV viewing levels.

A. Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) developed what has become the standard parasocial interaction audience scale in either its original, or trimmed-down 10-item version (A. Rubin & Perse, 1987). Although their original items did not stem from open-ended questionnaires, they generated them based on prior PSI research and theory and administered a 29-item survey to 329 local TV news viewers. In the initial study, factor analysis and data reduction resulted in a 20-item univariate measure with an alpha of .93 and that explained 45.7% of the variance. In a later study (A. Rubin & Perse, 1987), they introduced a 10-item version of the scale which had an alpha of .88 and correlated highly with their original scale ( $r = .96, p < .01$ ). They did not indicate how the reduction was performed. The two scales have been used to study a wide variety of programming. Although these two measures appear to be much stronger than prior attempts they do not have their origins in open-ended qualitative viewer surveys. And, like all the others, these scales only tap one univariate dimension, and thus do not address all the aspects of the construct first proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956). It appears, instead, to only assess the individual’s identification with their favorite character – disregarding related, yet important concepts. This may be problematic because it does not accurately represent PSI as a construct in the proper context.

The purpose of the present research was to develop and test a new, multi-dimensional, parasocial interaction measure. Starting with qualitative responses to questions about favorite characters, the researchers hoped to develop a multidimensional measure of parasocial interaction that would address the issue of the development of PSI over time and repeated exposure and tap all possible sub-dimensions of the construct. The new instrument was tested in several cross-sectional survey situations to determine its reliability and construct validity. Study 1 consisted of scale development and analysis, along with some preliminary findings based on a survey of college students. In Study 2, corroborative information was sought with a different respondent group, high school students.

### *Study 1: Scale Development and Cued-Recall Analysis*

Parasocial relationships have been studied with audiences of a wide variety of broadcast programming types (e.g., Auter & Lane, 1999; Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rayburn, 1980; 1981; Peck, 1995; A. Rubin & Perse, 1987). Researchers have suggested that certain types of programming may lend themselves more to the parasocial experience than others. The situation comedy was chosen as a referent in development of this scale for several reasons. First, the sitcom's recurring cast of regular characters exist as a "family" of interacting personae—regardless of whether they are cast as a nuclear family or are simply a group of interacting friends or coworkers (Goedkoop, 1983; Grote, 1983; Mitz, 1980). Second, program plots often focus on development of primary characters; however, it is usually not necessary to view episodes in a certain order in order to understand plot development—although some sitcoms do build loosely on prior plot lines (Fletcher, 1983; Himmelstein, 1984). Finally, it should be noted that much research has already been performed on TV news and soap operas. It was a goal of this study to broaden the focus of PSI research by looking at a different genre of television fiction, the situation comedy.

## METHOD

*Preliminary investigation* To enhance the probability that the new scale accurately reflected the dimensions of the parasocial process as it applies to television situation comedies, the researchers began with a qualitative approach (Blumler, 1985). A series of four open-ended questions were submitted to 54 undergraduates at a southern university during Spring 1991. Subjects were asked to respond in essay form to the following questions based on their favorite situation comedy: 1) What is it about the characters on your favorite sitcom that attracts you? 2) Describe examples of your reactions to and interactions with program characters when you watch your favorite sitcom; 3) Discuss the similarities you see between your friends and family and the characters on your favorite sitcom; 4) Discuss the similarities you see between yourself and the characters on your favorite sitcom. Responses to the open-ended questionnaire suggest that although many people interact parasocially with their favorite sitcom characters, the degree of intensity varies with the individual. This is consistent with past qualitative research. Statements made by a number of individuals also referred to the development of this relationship over time.

*Scale development.* Forty-four items which appeared to tap various aspects of parasocial interaction were constructed from the responses to the open-ended questionnaire. Three items from A. Rubin et al.'s (1985) survey were adapted and added to the questionnaire to fill in perceived gaps in the measure. In a preliminary investigation, the scale was administered to 417 undergraduate students at the same southern university after they had been shown an episode of "Murphy Brown." Of the total sample, 168 (40.3%) were male, 246 (59%) were

female, and 3 (0.7%) did not note their gender. The subjects were predominantly Caucasian (87.3%) with the next largest racial group being African-American (6%). Twenty-three subjects (5.5%) represented other ethnic groups and 5 individuals (1.2%) did not respond to the question.

Responses to the 47-item post-viewing PSI measure were analyzed using principal components analysis rather than factor analysis because there were no hypotheses about the underlying structure of the items under study (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989). The initial varimax rotation converged in 16 iterations. It was felt that further reduction should be performed. Items from the first analysis which had a minimum loading of .50 on a primary factor with less than a .50 loading on a secondary factor were retained and all other items were dropped from analysis. The remaining 35 items were analyzed a second time using principal components analysis with varimax rotation. The analysis converged in 10 iterations. In the second stage, a scree test clearly pointed to a four-factor solution. The 22 items retained in this solution had a minimum loading of .50 on a primary factor with all but one item loading at less than .35 on a secondary factor. One item double loaded at .40, but it was retained on the primary factor because reliability analysis suggested that its elimination would reduce the reliability of that factor significantly. The 4-factor solution explained 49.4% of the total variance. Table 1 notes the factor loadings of the retained items as well as the item means and standard deviations.

**TABLE 1**  
Audience-Persona Interaction Scale: Factor Loadings

Items	Mean	SD	Factors			
			1 Identify	2 Interest	3 Group	4 Problem
FAV reminds me of myself.	2.93	1.32	.85	.01	.07	.18
I have the same qualities as FAV.	2.86	1.06	.77	.13	.10	.31
I seem to have the same beliefs or attitudes as FAV.	3.16	1.17	.75	.05	.07	.33
I have the same problems as FAV.	2.60	1.03	.70	-.08	.10	-.08
I can imagine myself as FAV.	2.89	1.28	.64	.27	.21	.20
I can identify with FAV.	3.48	1.06	.61	.22	.03	.34
I would like to meet the actor who played FAV.	3.74	1.12	-.04	.71	.05	.04
I would watch the actor on another program.	3.46	0.98	.02	.68	.17	.29
I enjoyed trying to predict what FAV would do.	3.45	1.00	.11	.58	.15	.05
I hoped FAV achieved his or her goals.	3.77	0.94	.00	.57	.12	.24
I care about what happens to FAV.	3.38	0.93	.15	.57	.19	.23
I like hearing the voice of FAV.	3.50	1.01	.08	.56	.03	.23
CHARS interactions similar to mine with friends.	2.99	1.11	.11	.05	.82	.09
CHARS interactions similar to mine with family.	2.50	1.04	.06	-.10	.72	.15
My friends are like CHARs.	2.85	1.11	.12	.18	.72	.01
I'd enjoy interacting with CHARs and my friends at same time.	2.98	1.07	.06	.31	.69	.02

**TABLE 1** (cont'd)  
Audience-Persona Interaction Scale: Factor Loadings

Items	Mean	SD	Factors			
			1 Identify	2 Interest	3 Group	4 Problem
While watching show, I felt included in the group.	2.80	1.02	.19	.32	<b>.60</b>	-.06
I can relate to CHARS' attitudes.	3.58	0.98	.18	.24	<b>.58</b>	.14
I wish I could handle problems as well as FAV.	3.28	1.17	.22	.21	.07	<b>.78</b>
I like the way FAV handles problems.	3.45	1.06	.15	.29	.08	<b>.74</b>
I would like to be more like FAV.	3.02	1.22	.40	.14	.13	<b>.68</b>
I usually agreed with FAV.	3.56	0.94	.29	.26	.11	<b>.66</b>

  

	Identify	Interest	Group	Problem
Eigenvalue	8.96	3.34	2.95	2.04
Percentage of variance	25.60	9.50	8.40	5.80
Cronbach's Alpha	.87	.79	.83	.85
Mean Inter-item correlation	.53	.38	.45	.59

*Note:* Items were abbreviated to simplify table construction. FAV = "My favorite character from the show I just watched." CHARS = "The characters from the show I just watched. The response scale ranged from a low of 1 for "strongly disagree" to a high of 5 for "strongly agree." The first, second and sixth items of Factor 2, "Interest in Favorite Character" were obtained from Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) to fill in perceived gaps in the questionnaire. They were not generated in our essays.

Interestingly, the four factors mirror sub-dimensions of PSI predicted by theorists (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The four factors were *Identification with Favorite Character*, *Interest in Favorite Character*, *Group Identification/Interaction* (feeling a part of the TV "family" group), and (liking) *Favorite Character Problem Solving Abilities*. Pearson correlation analysis of the four subscales and the total index support the proposition that these are separate dimensions of an overall PSI index (see Table 2). Sub-scale eigenvalues, mean inter-item correlations and variance statistics suggest that the index and its sub-scales are quite reliable (see Table 1).

**TABLE 2**  
Factor Correlation Matrix

	Identify	Interest	Group	Problem	Total Scale
Identify	1.00				
Interest	.31	1.00			
Group	.32	.38	1.00		
Problem	.56	.47	.30	1.00	
Total Scale	.77	.70	.66	.81	1.00

$N = 417, p < .01$  for all correlations

Respondents were also asked to answer a 5-point question concerning how familiar they were with the program, "Murphy Brown." Response options were: "I have never watched the show before"; "I have watched the show only a few times"; "I have watched the show more than a few times"; "I watched the show quite often"; and "I almost always watch the show." In order to improve equality of cell sizes, the fourth and fifth groups were collapsed into a single category (see Table 3).

**TABLE 3**  
Mean Scores on API Sub-scales and Total Index by Exposure Level

	n	Interest	Identification	Group	Problem	Total Scale
Never Seen	111	2.85	3.38	2.77	3.23	3.06
Seen a Few Times	132	2.92	3.48	2.86	3.17	3.11
Seen More than a Few Times	91	3.10	3.59	3.06	3.33	3.27
Seen Often/ Always	82	3.16	3.89	3.24	3.75	3.51

## RESULTS

One-way ANOVAs were performed to see how scale responses related to familiarity with the stimulus program, "Murphy Brown."

Factor 1, *Identification with Favorite Character*, did appear to be significantly related to exposure level  $F(3, 412) = 2.64, p = .05$ . Factor 2, *Interest in Favorite Character*, showed an even stronger relationship with exposure level  $F(3, 412) = 10.05, p < .01$ . Factor 3, *Group Identification/Interaction*, was significant as well  $F(3, 412) = 7.39, p < .01$ . Factor 4, *Favorite Character's Problem Solving Ability*, was also significant  $F(3, 412) = 7.99, p < .01$ . One-way analysis of variance of the total API Scale revealed the strongest F-ratio of all  $F(3, 412) = 11.29, p < .01$ . Mean scores for the API Scale and all sub-scales except "Problem Solving," increased in linear fashion with increased exposure levels. For the "Problem Solving" sub-scale, the relationship was quite close to linear. In fact, the consistency of the one-way ANOVA results is noteworthy, considering the use of the single-item exposure measure employed. Pearson correlation analysis also revealed a relationship between level of exposure and the API Scale and its various sub-scales: (Identify,  $r = .14, p < .01$ ; Interest,  $r = .26, p < .01$ ; Group,  $r = .22, p < .01$ ; Problem,  $r = .21, p < .01$ ; total index,  $r = .28, p < .01$ ).

### *Study 2: A Field Test of the API Scale*

In order to further test the measure's validity and reliability, it was administered to approximately 250 high school students – along with items assessing their perceptions of other related constructs (TV viewing level, perceptions of TV as reality, and affinity for TV). Adolescents were chosen for this second analysis of the API Scale because their PSI has not been studied in the past, although they have been found to be consumers of large quantities of TV (Brown, Childers, Bauman, & Koch, 1990; Comstock & Paik, 1987). It has also been determined that viewing style, age and favorite program genre may affect viewing-level and participation in the TV-viewing experience (Hawkins, Reynolds, & Pingree, 1991; Windahl, Hojerback, & Hedinsson, 1986).

In a number of studies, a relatively strong relationship has been found between TV viewing level and companionship needs (Conway & A. Rubin, 1991; Greenberg, 1974; A. Rubin, 1979; 1981; A. Rubin et al., 1985; Turner, 1993). Similar to the interpersonal relation-

ship, research has suggested that positive parasocial relationships lead to an increased desire to engage more — which in the case of parasocial relationships would correlate to increased viewing of programming that includes an audience member's favorite personality. The more positive PSI relationships with television characters a person maintain, the more TV would likely be viewed by that person — in order to engage more often with favorite personalities. This led to the first hypothesis of this second study:

H1: Adolescent parasocial interaction will be positively correlated with average television viewing level.

Affinity, a *liking* for something, has been alternatively described in some communication research as *dependency*, a need for something (e.g., A. Rubin et al., 1985; A. Rubin & Perse, 1987; Perse & R. Rubin, 1989). While the two are not identical, they are related constructs — both resulting in an increased need to interact — and in interpersonal communication research they appear to be directly related to the strength of an interaction relationship. Like the interpersonal studies, media research has also shown that a person's affinity for (or "dependency on") television is correlated with viewing for companionship and/or PSI motives (e.g., Auter & Palmgreen, 1993; Dorr, 1983; Dorr, Kovaric & Doubleday, 1990; Kim & A. Rubin, 1997; Perse, 1990; Potter, 1992; A. Rubin, 1979; 1981; 1983; A. Rubin & Perse, 1987; A. Rubin et al., 1985; J. Tsao, 1996). If the API Scale is indeed tapping a person's parasocial interaction, then, as these positive relationships should exist between it and affinity for TV. This suggests the second hypothesis:

H2: Affinity for (or dependency upon) television will be positively correlated with adolescent parasocial interaction.

The same research shows that an individual's perception of television as an accurate representation of reality is also positively correlated with parasocial interaction. This appears to result in increased viewing both for surrogate companionship motives as well as to learn better ways to interact in the real world. Again, evidence of a positive relationship between API Scale results and perceptions of TV as representing reality would be an additional representation of the validity of the measure. This suggests Hypothesis three:

H3: Perception of TV as reality will be positively correlated with adolescent parasocial interaction.

## METHOD

Three of five local high schools in Evansville, Indiana agreed to participate in the study. A questionnaire was administered to home room classes chosen by the principals. Home rooms were picked rather than "regular" classes because it was felt that they would represent a wider body of the school population — and thus be more generalizable. The sample was stratified to include approximately the same number of adolescents from each high school grade level.

Subjects responded to a 58-item questionnaire, consisting primarily of closed-ended five-point Likert, forced choice questions. The first 22 items on the survey represented the Audience-Persona Interaction Scale. Questions 23 - 32 measured the participant's affinity for or dependence on television, as well as the perception that television was real (A. Rubin, 1981).

Television viewing levels were measured by asking for an estimate of the viewing on a typical weekday, Saturday, and Sunday. Totals were summed, weighted and averaged to obtain a representation of the weeks viewing time. Additional demographic and psychographic questions were asked. A total of 247 usable surveys were tabulated.

## RESULTS

*Summary Statistics* Subjects ranged in age from 15 to 19 with a mean age of 16.76. Most of the respondents who reported their gender were female ( $n = 121$ ). Males represented 105 of the respondents. Twenty-one subjects did not report their gender. The sample was overwhelmingly Caucasian ( $n = 180$ ). Twenty-nine students listed themselves as African-American. Twelve reported that they were of other races. Twenty-six students did not list their race.

*Scale Reliabilities* Of the 247 subjects, 241 responded completely to the 22-item API Scale. Cronbach's alpha for the entire measure was .84. Alphas for the four sub-scales were: *Interest*, .82; *Identify*, .81; *Group*, .73; *Problem*, .70.

Fewer respondents completed the measures of affinity and perception of reality ( $n = 238$ ). Cronbach's alphas for these measures were also quite acceptable (affinity, .76; reality, .57).

H1: Pearson's Correlation analyses were performed to determine if responses to the API Scale and its sub-scales were positively related to average weekly TV viewing, as predicted. A mild linear relationship was found between the API Scale and viewing level ( $r = .18, p < .01$ ). The sub-scale, *Group Identification/Interaction* was the most highly correlated with average television viewing level ( $r = .23, p < .01$ ). *Favorite Character's Problem Solving Ability* was also significantly correlated with average television viewing levels ( $r = .15, p < .05$ ). The other two sub-scales were not significantly correlated with amount of TV viewing.

H2: A mild positive correlation was found between affinity for (or dependency on) television and the API Scale ( $r = .17, p < .01$ ). Similar to the results in the first hypothesis, the same two API sub-scales exhibited these correlations with affinity (*Group*,  $r = .21, p < .01$ ; *Problem*,  $r = .13, p < .05$ ). The other two sub-scales were not significantly correlated with affinity.

H3: Pearson's Correlation analyses revealed a stronger relationship between perception of TV as reality and responses to the API Scale ( $r = .26, p < .01$ ). All of the sub-scales of the API measure were positively correlated to respondents' perception of TV as reality (*Identify*,  $r = .25, p < .01$ ; *Group*,  $r = .23, p < .01$ ; *Problem*,  $r = .21, p < .01$ ; *Interest*,  $r = .20, p < .01$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Results of the initial study suggest that the API Scale may be a more discrete measure of PSI – able to tap all the sub-dimensions of the construct suggested by theorists (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Nordlund, 1978; Rosengren & Windahl, 1972). Unlike previous univariate measures, the API Scale taps all dimensions of PSI suggested by theorists. Identifying with a persona, interest in that persona, and liking that persona's methods of solving problems are certainly different aspects of the desire to "interact" with that individual. Although based on the interactions of individual personalities, groups develop their own climate and culture — often quite different from one individual member. Naturally, this would be a different aspect of a desire to interact. The API Scale addresses all these individual aspects of the parasocial experience.

This investigation also presents data suggesting the validity and reliability of this multi-dimensional scale. Statistical analysis of the scale and its sub-dimensions suggest that they are all quite reliable. And, while the sub-scales appear to be related, they are clearly not tapping the same things. Further, results of both studies show that the API scale and its sub-dimensions are positively correlated to television viewing level, affinity for TV and perception of TV as reality, offering additional evidence of the validity of the measure. Finally, the

fact that these relationships vary by sub-dimension, and in some cases were not discovered, lends evidence to the fact that the scale is multi-dimensional.

As expected, there was a positive relationship between television viewing level and parasocial interaction in adolescents. However—perhaps because the API sub-scales are primarily designed to measure parasocial interactions with specific, favorite characters—the relationship was limited. Subjects' interest in and identification with their favorite characters was not significantly correlated with their general television viewing levels. It is quite possible, however, that they may be correlated with their viewing levels of their favorite program/character. The survey used in this study did not measure that question. Similar to the first hypothesis, it appears that affinity for specific, favorite, characters does not correlate with certain sub-scales on the API measure. Perhaps a more specific affinity measure or a more general PSI measure would have shown a stronger relationship. On the other hand, a general perception of TV as reality seems to strongly relate to parasocial interaction with a specific program. It would appear that such a perception would be correlated with PSI whether in general or in specific circumstances.

In sum, the API Scale appears to be a multi-dimensional measure of the multi-dimensional construct, parasocial interaction. Positive correlations appear to exist between it (and its sub-dimensions) and TV viewing levels, affinity, and perception of TV as reality. Still, because the questionnaire as designed compared general television viewing with more specific parasocial interaction, it may be found in future research that relationships are even stronger than were found in this study.

Conceptualizing PSI in such a multidimensional manner allows researchers to explore how the sub-dimensions of PSI, tapped by the API Scale, may relate in different fashions to other variables involved in the media consumption process—such as exposure, gratifications sought, and gratifications obtained. It also may be that certain situations may lead to different developmental patterns on the sub-dimensions. The API Scale appears to possess very acceptable levels of reliability, both for the total scale and its four sub-scales. The linear positive relationships found between the four sub-scales (and the total scale) and the program exposure measure constitute preliminary evidence of construct validity, and indicate that the API Scale may be used in investigations of the development of parasocial interaction. Further research is needed to determine the full usefulness of this measurement tool.

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